

Insight Meditation
Practical Steps to Ultimate Truth



Achan Sobin S. Namto

Introduction by Jack Kornfield
Revised Edition

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Edited by Rev. Martha Dhammapali

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A note on the cover image: Achan Sobin often uses the example of the sun, a tree and its shadow in his teaching. The sun signifies the mind, the tree, one's physical body, and the shadow, the body's movement in the present moment, which changes in response to the mind. It is this "shadow" which we are to observe during vipassana meditation.

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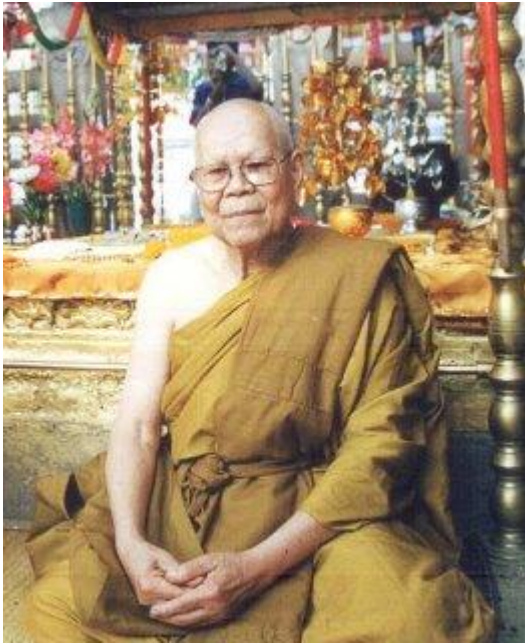
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About Achan Sobin Namto

Born in 1931 in Wangplado, Thailand, Achan Sobin S. Namto has spent more than 40 years as a Buddhist monk and teacher of vipassana meditation, Buddhism and Abhidhamma (Buddhist metaphysics). For several years he lived as a wandering forest monk, spending long periods in solitary meditation practice.

Achan Sobin trained with many meditation masters and also practiced at the center of Mahasi Sayadaw in Burma. His principal teacher, Chao Khun Bhavanabhirama Thera, taught him a meticulous step-by-step method for developing precise mindfulness, a method which is described in Achan's book, *Moment to Moment Mindfulness: A Pictorial Manual for Meditators*.

Achan Sobin taught in Thailand for many years, establishing an Abhidhamma and vipassana center in Phuket Province where meditators were able to participate in a three-month winter training course.

In 1972, the Buddhist Sangha Council appointed him the Abbot of the first Thai temple in the United States. Achan was also the founder-Abbot of the Wat Buddhawararam temple in Denver, Colorado.

As a lay instructor from 1980—2000, Achan taught at the Vipassana Dhura Meditation Society in Denver, as well as at other centers where he contributed his skills and energies towards the further development of insight meditation in the West.

In December of 2000, Achan Sobin re-ordained as a Buddhist monk in Bodh Gaya, India, where he was given the new name, "Sopako Bodhi Bhikkhu." He currently resides at his meditation center in Wangplado, Thailand.

Foreword

When the Venerable Maha Sobin S. Namto first became my close disciple in B.E. 2492 (1949), I was Abbot of Wat Maha Dhatu monastery, Bangkok. I acted as Preceptor at his novice ordination, and later he became a monk at Wat Maha Dhatu.

Throughout the years I have found him to be a forthright and amiable person. From the early days of his novitiate he displayed a keen interest in practicing vipassana meditation. At that time he was the very first novice to complete seven continuous, non-stop months of insight meditation under the guidance of the late meditation master, The Most Venerable Chao Khun Bhavanabhira Thera (Sukh Pavaro). He continued to earnestly pursue his studies of the Dhamma (the Buddhist teachings) and meditation. I appointed him as a teacher and mentor to his students, and he was highly respected by both clergy and laity.

I am aware that the study and practice of Buddhism is the only way to gain its benefits. In B.E. 2496 (1953), I founded a vipassana center at Wat Maha Dhatu where Maha Sobin taught for many years. It is well known locally and internationally. I fervently wish that all monks, nuns, novices and laity dedicate themselves to faithfully serving and practicing the Dhamma.

Maha Sobin has long agreed with my aspiration. Seeking to deepen his Dhamma knowledge, I sent him for further studies to the Venerable U Visudha Sayadaw Kaba of Rangoon, Burma in B.E. 2500 (1957). Returning to Thailand, he continued teaching meditation and Abhidhamma.

In 1960, I was pleased to honor the requests of the Lao Buddhist Sangha, the Head Instructor for vipassana meditation, and the Laotian government's invitation extended to Maha Sobin to teach meditation and Abhidhamma in Luang Prabang. On his return to Thailand after two years, he resumed teaching and founded the Abhidhamma Vidhyakorn Institute in Southern Thailand.

Later, The Most Venerable Chao Khun Dhammakosacharn, Chairperson of the Wat Thai in America committee, selected him and four other monks to establish the first Thai temple in Los Angeles, California. Maha Sobin was appointed its first Abbot.

Maha Sobin is also the founder-Abbot of a vipassana temple in Denver, Colorado (Wat Buddhawararam). In 1980 he decided to resign from the monkhood, but he continues to dedicate himself entirely and untiringly to teaching vipassana, Abhidhamma and Buddhism to North Americans and the Southeast Asian community. He has established several meditation centers and has a number of Western disciples.

I was delighted to learn that he is the author of two books in English on insight meditation. I am confident these publications will be of great worth in transmitting the message of vipassana meditation to the general public in the Western world. These offerings are the result of his many years of persevering effort on behalf of the Dhamma.

May he and his Western disciples progress and find peace and contentment in the Dhamma. May all beings enter the stream of Buddhaddhamma forever.

—His Eminence the Somdet Phra Budthacharn
Acting Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha of Thailand,
Agga Maha Pandita of Burma,
Lord Abbot, Wat Maha Dhatu,
Director of Vipassana Meditation in Thailand

Preface

The past should not be followed,
 The future not be sought.
 What is past is gone,
 And the future has not come.
 But whoever sees clearly in the
 Present moment of the here and now
 Knows that which is unshakable,
 And will live in a still, unmoving state of mind.

—Bhaddekaratta Sutta, M. III. 185

For a long time I have intended to write a book on vipassana — insight meditation — based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness of the *Maha Satipatthana Sutta*.

As a novice monk in Bangkok, my monastic training centered on memorizing Pali texts. No instruction manuals were available about vipassana practice. But my teacher, The Most Venerable Chao Khun Bhavanabhirama Thera, did not teach us just to parrot the material we learned by heart. He would reconstruct the building blocks of abstruse scriptural material in a systematic way until we had a thorough knowledge of our studies. No certificate was awarded for vipassana study and very few novices joined those classes. In those days, the practice of insight meditation was not widespread, and I felt fortunate to be the student of such a conscientious instructor.

Almost seventy years ago my teacher studied and practiced with some extraordinarily gifted monks at the Burmese temple in Bangkok. Throughout the years I had a number of instructors from whom I learned the principles of teaching vipassana meditation. Nevertheless, I retained the basic method of my first teacher, finding it to be a precise and highly effective approach to vipassana training based on the early commentary to the *Maha Satipatthana Sutta*.

When I arrived in California, I noticed that many Americans were introduced to meditation through the written word. At that time it seemed to me that over ninety percent of the Buddhist books in North America dealt with the

concentration practices of various traditions, but only a handful dealt with vipassana meditation, which was the earliest meditation instruction given by the Buddha. As far as I know, no detailed book on the step-by-step approach to vipassana meditation exists in the West. Therefore, I wrote the present book about the theoretical and practical aspects of insight meditation for both the novice and the more experienced meditator. My introductory book, *Moment to Moment Mindfulness: a Pictorial Manual for Meditators*, describes the technique for complete, non-stop mindfulness practice. It is suitable for both an intensive meditation retreat and one's daily practice.

The publication of this book became a reality through the generous donations of practitioners and supporters. Inasmuch as they have offered the greatest of gifts—the teaching of the Dhamma—the credit belongs to them for spreading the message of insight meditation.

May all Dhamma comrades share any merit gained through the publication of this book. May we all practice together to end delusion and suffering and realize the taste of absolute freedom, Nibbana.

I transfer any merit realized from this book to my parents, teachers, all the friends who have supported me, and all sentient beings. May we strive to eliminate suffering at all times.

—Achan Sobin S. Namto
Bangkok, Thailand
1989

Editor's Preface to the First Edition

Since arriving in America in 1972, Achan Sobin has taught a wide cross-section of North American insight meditators. He has been particularly devoted to establishing a thorough foundation for Western practitioners from whose ranks will come a new generation of meditation teachers.

As an active teacher of vipassana meditation and Buddhist metaphysics (Abhidhamma) for over three decades, Achan Sobin has continually stressed careful preparation of the individual student. Each meditator, however, is ultimately responsible for the cultivation of self-discipline and personal investigation of the basic principles underlying the practice of insight meditation. The student-meditator, thus equipped, possesses the necessary tools to trace the thread of reliable training running through the array of methods introduced in the West. The thoughtful meditator will realize that the true flowering of any genuine spiritual training culminates in the unfolding and refinement of such qualities as loving-kindness, liberality, serenity and skillful action in daily life.

Achan Sobin, who is originally from Thailand, has had major portions of this work (particularly sections concerning Abhidhamma metaphysics) re-translated into Thai and checked with him for accuracy. Deep gratitude is extended to the vipassana meditator Baw Tananone, our English-to-Thai translator, for his competent assistance. Any error in the transmission of Dhamma instruction lies with the Editor, for which I ask the reader's pardon.

Achan's style of teaching in English results in a rather concentrated presentation. For ease of reading I have edited portions of the text and have kept the use of Pali and Sanskrit terms to a minimum. Generally, the more familiar Sanskrit forms have been retained. The instruction offered in this book is intended for insight meditation students of all levels: novice, intermediate and advanced. We trust that meditators following the Zen and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions will also find helpful guidance for their practice.

The noble teachings of the Buddha-Dhamma and insight meditation are reaching around the world. The deepening of his or her practice is, indeed, a great challenge to the meditator wishing to pursue development by means of this most subtle tool for spiritual awakening. The instructions in these pages are presented with the heartfelt wish that meditators will persevere on the path of mindfulness to the end of the journey: perfect freedom.

—Rev. Martha Dhammapali
(Martha Sentnor)
Bangkok, Thailand
1989

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Many kinds of support contributed to creating the book you now hold in your hands. These are some of the friends and mentors who contributed their loving-kindness for many years. The list could go on and on. Heartfelt gratitude is extended to: Carmen Cruz and Rev. Lok To of New York City; Rev. T.N. Chan-Nhu, Dr. Hung and Nguyet Tran; Rev. Nora Kung-Li; Nicole Langley and R.A. Reed for reading the manuscript; Karen M. Gray, ever-generous with her gracious sharing of Dhamma insights; Heng-Yueh Li, an extraordinary teacher and exemplar of Dhamma; Ven. Dr. H. Gunaratana Maha Thera; my Preceptor, Ven. K. Piyatissa Maha Thera; Ven. Iranasophano; Samanefis Nguyen thi Quy, and Suyany.

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Achan Sobin offers sincere thanks to Chao Khun Phra Debvedi (Prayudh Payutto); Ven. Dr. Phra Maha Prayoon Mererk; Ven. Achan Surasak Cheevanando; Ven. Maha Brahma Sapa Ano; Anagarika Dhammadinna; Shirley Johannesen; Gregory Kramer; Jerry Lewis; Emily Richard; Dr. Christopher Robinson; Stephen Roehrig, J. Karen Evans, and Dr. Carola Andujo.

Finally, profound respect and appreciation are offered to Achan Sobin S. Namto for sharing his inspired teaching and incisive knowledge of insight meditation with his American and Canadian students.

—Rev. Martha Dhammapali

Introduction

It is with great appreciation of Achan Sobin and the practice of insight meditation that I begin this introduction to *Insight Meditation: Practical Steps to Ultimate Truth*. After training and teaching for many years as a monk in Thailand, Achan Sobin found his way to the west in 1972. For more than 15 years now, despite difficulties with spoken English, he has been working in a persistent and caring way with American students in New York, Chicago, California, and elsewhere. He has compiled this book to be a sincere offering of his teaching, combining both practical advice and some Buddhist theoretical frameworks for use by insight meditators. It touches on many of the most important topics in practice, beginning with developing a simple and wise relation to the body, having an understanding of the Middle Path, knowing the difference between concentration and mindfulness practices, and establishing oneself in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Then Achan elaborates further on traditional Buddhist topics such as the five spiritual faculties, the vipassana bhumi, and the sense bases, expressing them in ways that are relevant to meditation.

For students of insight meditation and Buddhism, this book brings together both elements of practice and theory. It can serve as an introduction to vipassana or as an expression for experienced students of a number of important topics in practice and related areas of Buddhist psychology.

I hope this book and the heartfelt Dharma teaching of Achan Sobin is the cause of benefit, understanding and blessing for himself and for students in the west.

—Jack Kornfield
Insight Meditation West

A Note on the Word “Dhamma”

The word “Dhamma” is used throughout this book since there is no equivalent English term. “Dhamma” has many meanings in Buddhism. It commonly refers to the Buddhist teachings or instructional texts. It also signifies the universal laws known as the Four Noble Truths, which are: 1) That all existence is unsatisfactory, possessing the potential for suffering (*dukkha*); 2) that the cause of all suffering is craving; 3) that suffering stops when craving ceases; the absence of suffering is called “Nibbana” (or “Nirvana”), and is the goal of Buddhist practice; 4) that by following a course of action called the “Noble Eightfold Path,” one can reach the end of suffering. The Eightfold Path consists of: right view, right effort, right concentration, right mindfulness, right livelihood, right action, right speech, and right thought.

The dhamma is also one of the Three Gems, things regarded as worthy of reverence to Buddhists. The other gems are the Buddha and the sangha, the community of holy disciples.

Chapter One: Gateways to Wisdom

One Family in Dhamma

More than 2,500 years ago the Lord Buddha discovered a liberating truth about reality called the “Dhamma.” Seeing this truth clearly enough, he found, results in complete freedom from suffering.

The Buddha also discovered a practical way to reach this freedom: a type of mental cultivation known as insight or vipassana meditation, which can be practiced by anyone. This simple meditation technique enables us to perceive reality clearly and become free of unhappiness, just as the Buddha and his disciples did.

Those who practice insight meditation gather together as one family, absorbing differences of background, temperament and inclination. Although each person’s experience is private, we all work together under the guidance of the teachings and the meditation instructor, the good friend in Dhamma.

Buddhism makes certain fundamental assertions about the human condition. By actually practicing insight meditation and being committed to self-exploration, we can know experientially whether or not Buddhism fulfills its claims. Otherwise we merely continue to follow another one of the world’s “isms.” Each one of us has to re-trace the journey made by the Buddha himself, placing his footsteps alongside those of the Great Master.

We are all capable of tasting the truth of the Buddhist teachings. All of us can realize the same enlightenment, and drink from the one great ocean of wisdom.

Searching For a New Path

History records that the Buddha proclaimed a new path to final emancipation. Our study of insight meditation will show why the Buddha-elect set out in a new direction in his quest for liberation.

Before his enlightenment the Buddha was known as the Prince Siddhartha. When he was thirty years old, the Prince renounced his royal status and became the ascetic monk Gautama. For six years he arduously practiced different

methods of concentration (samadhi)¹ meditation, believing that this vigorous regimen would free him from the round of suffering and birth-and-death.

Although he attained extremely rarefied levels of tranquility, the Buddha once again experienced mental conflict when coming out of those states and returning to normal consciousness. Realizing that complete freedom from mental impurities such as greed, hatred and delusion continued to elude him despite his relentless effort, he noticed that states of deep concentration were conditioned, temporary, and could not be sustained indefinitely.

According to the Pali texts, the Buddha then set out on uncharted territory. Vowing to make one last determined effort or die in the struggle, he renewed his experimentation with the breath. He knew he had to use a different approach in order to subdue his immense powers of concentration, or his mind would automatically follow the path of samadhi.

Inhaling and exhaling deeply, the Buddha was surprised to experience pain. Unexpectedly, long-buried memories and emotions rose to the surface of his consciousness, threatening to overwhelm his great vow. The long-suppressed defilements of mind, personified as *Mara*, the non-liberator, assailed the young monk. Regaining composure, he calmly focused his mind on the relentless attack launched by Mara's army (which was in reality nothing other than his own mental turmoil). By observing mental and physical states as they momentarily arose and disappeared in consciousness, the monk Gautama was finally able to vanquish all mental afflictions.

He sat in steadfast meditation all through the night, sheltered under the branches of the Bodhi tree. It was the night of the full moon of May. At dawn he underwent a profound spiritual awakening, an unexcelled enlightenment. During the long hours of that eventful night, the self-made chains of bondage were broken. Experiencing the bliss of emancipation and ending years of spiritual doubt, the Prince of the Sakyas was free to live a new and independent life. He was now the Buddha, the Awakened One.

For forty-five years the wise and compassionate Buddha traveled the length and breadth of India, sharing with all seekers the same liberating path to freedom discovered by all Buddhas.

¹ There are many types of samadhi — also known as samatha — meditation. In samadhi practice one develops very strong concentration by focusing uninterruptedly on one thing only, such as a candle flame, until the mind enters a trance. There are dozens of possible objects to focus on in samadhi practice.

What is Insight Meditation?

Insight meditation means inward-seeing: seeing reality as it is, not as we would like it to be. It brings a radical change in the way we view ourselves and the world. Insight meditation is the window which reveals the awakened mind, and allows us to perfect the art of living.

We are all familiar with the joys and disappointments which determine our day-to-day reality. Caught in the grip of neurotic emotions and attachments, we know something is not right: *life hurts*.

If we look deeply into our own minds and bodies we can find another way to live. What should we do, however, with the massive forest of entangled emotions we have collected through the years? Vipassana meditation uses all the contents of the mind as precious fuel. Its practice completely consumes the stress and pain which darken our lives. The mind is then released from tensions and conflict so we can live freely. This personal purification process, which can be practiced by people of any religious faith (or none), cultivates true humanity, cleanses mental impurities, and develops complete mental health, but only if we are willing to commit ourselves to the training. Insight meditation shows us who and what we are, and what we can become. Our own minds and bodies are the workbooks.

This practice is simple, systematic and direct. The meditator observes his mind and body with a non-attached, objective awareness (mindfulness) of what is actually present, *from moment to moment*, as consciousness apprehends phenomena arising and disappearing in the present time. A gentle practice, this step-by-step training strengthens one's awareness of mental and physical states until intuitive knowledge arises spontaneously in the mind.

It will be helpful to analyze the compound term "*sati-patthana*." "*Sati*" refers to mindfulness or focused attention, but derives its meaning from a specific context. In insight meditation, *sati* is the mental activity used to inspect an object of consciousness² with bare attention, on a *momentary basis*.

Bare attention is awareness that is free of an overlay of negative or positive attitudes. With bare attention we see only what is actually present. It refers to seeing phenomenal events in their arising-and-vanishing stages. Each one of us has some degree of general mindfulness or awareness in everyday life. *Patthana* is concerned with being aware, or keeping the object close in the mind. In other words, it is "presence of mind."

² An "object of consciousness" means anything we perceive or apprehend. It can be a physical or mental phenomenon such as a sound, sight, smell, taste, a feeling of heat, coldness, pain, pressure, a thought, an emotion, and so forth. See Glossary.

The close bonding of *sati* and *patthana* is similar to a cup placed on a table. The table has four legs which give it stability and allow it to support the weight of the object. The “supports” for insight meditation refer to the objects we focus on or “put” mindfulness on: i.e., materiality and mentality.

These mind and body objects, which are not remembered but are noticed as they actually arise in the present time, are the *only* phenomena observed in insight meditation practice.

The Genesis of Mindfulness Training

The *Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Maha Satipatthana Sutta)* contains the heart of the Buddha’s teachings on meditation. This scripture is regarded as the oldest seminal instruction given by the Buddha on mental cultivation. In Southeast Asia it is studied at length by the community of monks, nuns and Buddhist laity. It is a mixed discourse in that it presents both concentration (*samadhi*) and insight (*vipassana*) meditation techniques. A competent teacher can assist individual students in determining which meditation objects are appropriate for either practice.³

Unique to the Buddhist teachings, the method described in the *Satipatthana Sutta* is an outstanding contribution to the worldwide body of instruction on meditation practice. Every major Buddhist meditative tradition incorporates some level of instruction derived from this scripture.

The Buddha gave the *Mindfulness* discourse more than once, in different versions. The Kuru people of India were among the fortunate recipients of this instruction. They had a reputation as a wise and generous people who assiduously cultivated spiritual disciplines. The Buddha perceived that the Kurus were spiritually developed enough to receive this new teaching. For those Kurus who wished to pursue concentration practice or meditation for “happiness while living in the world,” as the Buddha termed *samadhi* attainments, the Buddha gave further instruction on developing states of deep concentration. Concentration practice can serve as a preparation for *vipassana* meditation *provided* one can let go of attachment to the calmness generated by these states.

Many of the Kuru people were prepared to accept the Buddha’s new message in order to become entirely free of the struggle of birth-aging-and-death. The Buddha taught a simple but subtle way of focusing the attention on one’s own

³ The main text of this *Discourse* contains a commentary and sub-commentary with many technical terms. See the Recommended Reading List for information on the commentary.

mind-and-body processes. Equipped with this new tool, these meditators were able to progress to the higher realization of liberating wisdom.

Why We Wait

Vipassana practice is often postponed to some nebulous future time, but there's no guarantee that in the future we'll be mentally and physically capable of the task. The Buddha had many disciples who resolved to practice under the most difficult circumstances. For those individuals, practicing meditation under such conditions was preferable to continuing to live a meaningless existence of spiritual emptiness.

We can offer many rationalizations for postponing meditation. Sometimes, as we approach the moment of commitment, fear makes us hesitate and retreat. We are entering unknown territory. It seems safer to remain in our uneasy comfort. And so the years go by.

Ultimately, the great incentive for self-exploration is our growing sensitivity to the vacuous, insipid nature of life. It is not really a question of renunciation, but rather of interest dying out naturally. Something in us is stirred, driving us to finally search for a way out.

Sometimes we cling to our own mental turmoil because we fear letting go, fear freedom. We continue to clutch the pain and hurt in our hearts. Perhaps it is the only thing we have in our lives. But someday we will realize that we don't have to fear the unknown. Then we will take the first steps on our inward journey.

Expectations in Practice

When people first begin practicing vipassana, they often expect to experience mystical states of mind or even develop psychic powers. Others may wish to escape their everyday responsibilities. These are common misunderstandings regarding the purpose of insight meditation.

Vipassana training is sometimes a helpful adjunct to psychotherapy, but its higher purpose is complete liberation from obsessions and mental impurities. The major and minor mental stresses we experience are born in the mind. *It is the mind's untamed condition that is the source of all our troubles.* We don't have to journey around the world, visit many teachers, or read a hundred books to find the solution to our difficulties. The answer is very, very close!

When we are really determined to end mental attachments and conflicts, we will begin to cultivate the way of mindfulness. When mental disturbances are sapped of their nourishment, they begin to lose their power to delude us. The nature of our "original mind" is luminous and serene. It is always there, like the sun behind clouds.

Practicing intensive insight meditation is similar to enrolling in a special school. We learn to do ordinary, everyday activities in a new way. The mind is tended to as if it were a young child. We watch it grow and learn from its mistakes until it reaches maturity and independence.

There is much work to do. Now we can begin this great experiment.

The First Noble Truth

The Buddha's appraisal of the human predicament comes as a mind-jolting shock for many people. In the First Noble Truth the Buddha stated that all conditioned existence is essentially unsatisfactory. That's because it is impermanent, and is not amenable to our control. These are not popular ideas. When initially hearing the First Noble Truth, people often react with denial.

Certainly the Buddha recognized the joyful experiences of life, but most people seek nothing short of permanent happiness and stability. The problem is, the world is ruled by laws of cause-and-effect, and we live with the continual flux of changing circumstances. Grasping at what is unattainable (because it is always changing) inevitably leads to frustration and mental turmoil. According to the Buddha, this ignorance of the way things really are is the cause of suffering. All his teachings are aimed at helping us find a way out of this blind alley. We need to wake up!

The Buddha called this stress-frustration-pain cycle "*dukkha*." While no exact English synonym for "*dukkha*" exists, this word is often rendered as "unsatisfactoriness," "suffering," or "dis-ease." *Dukkha* is profound, pervasive and universal.

For some individuals, referring to life as prone to unsatisfactoriness may not be meaningful. They can better understand the aspect of impermanence or nonself. Nonself refers to something which is not ours to control. Actually, unsatisfactoriness, impermanence and nonself are interrelated. If we observe impermanence in our own body-mind processes we will eventually realize there is nothing to grasp. We will clearly see that nothing in life is completely controllable.

In the conventional Buddhist teachings, unsatisfactoriness is allied to birth, illness, old age and death. *Dukkha* takes many forms, such as being separated from loved ones, being joined to that which is disliked, and failing to attain one's goals. This is the "stuff" of ordinary life. But the truth of *dukkha* goes far beyond these ordinary manifestations. *Dukkha* reveals itself in many subtle ways and has many guises.

Many people erroneously describe Buddhism as pessimistic. However, although the Buddha declared that life is unsatisfactory and the cause of our pain is desire and attachment, he also showed us the way out: a practice-path that

takes us from pain to freedom. For more than twenty-five centuries, Buddhists have been walking this timeless path to deliverance.

Insight and Concentration

“Insight-wisdom,” an important term in vipassana meditation, refers to a deep, intuitive understanding of unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and nonselfness. It is not an intellectual understanding, but an experiential one — an immediate, personal epiphany. It is experienced as clearly as seeing one’s hand in front of one’s face.

Insight-wisdom cannot develop without some degree of concentration. The meditator should be aware, however, of the differences between concentration (samadhi) and insight (vipassana) meditation.

Strong concentration temporarily suppresses mental hindrances such as anger. But the meditator needs to know that *when concentration is very strong, mindfulness is weakened. The highly tranquilized mind cannot gain insight-wisdom.* That’s because the flux of phenomena cannot be observed as long as consciousness is fixed on a single object.

In vipassana practice, a level of concentration known as “momentary concentration” (khanika-samadhi) is developed which does the work of *knowing* the arising-and-ceasing of phenomena that exists at any given moment. This level of concentration is not so strong that a student has no thoughts or enters a trance. It can be attained by anyone, and is definitely sufficient for insight meditation practice.

Concentration and the Nature of Consciousness

Concentration (samadhi) practice can induce a state of meditative absorption or trance because the student focuses his attention on a *single* object such as the breath, a sound, or some other form. The mind gradually withdraws from internal and external distractions, including sense-impressions, as consciousness ascends to blissful realms of form, and even to formless states. The rare meditator may even realize the sphere of “neither-perception-nor-non-perception,” in which only the most subtle trace of consciousness can be detected. At this plateau a type of emptiness or voidness is realized. Concentration gradually recedes until the state of emptiness⁴ (of an object) alone survives in awareness, just as a moving object placed in the foreground gradually withdraws into the background and disappears from sight.

⁴ This emptiness, based on concentration, is not the genuine emptiness of the ultimate freedom called “Nibbana.”

From the perspective of vipassana meditation, however, the volatile nature of the mind does not permit the meditator to focus on a single object without fluctuation. Ultimately speaking, there are no pure, static states of samadhi.

It is important to understand the Buddhist view of mind or consciousness. Normally we think of consciousness as something stable throughout time. According to the Buddhist teachings, however, this stability is an illusion. Individual moments of consciousness are born and then instantly die. This is happening all the time. One moment of consciousness arises, dies out, and is immediately replaced by a new one. Consciousness seems to be continuous because the same process keeps occurring, and the replacement happens so fast we don't notice it. Hundreds of mind-moments arise and die out every second. Even in states of very deep concentration, moments of consciousness appear and are replaced in continuous succession.

Strong concentration temporarily subdues and suppresses sensuality, ill will, worry, apathy and skeptical doubt. Within its limitations, strong concentration serves many purposes. Those who aspire to become Bodhisattvas⁵ may, with the aid of concentration, cultivate strong mental powers in order to effectively help others. However, developing a high level concentration can be dangerous unless a meditator is guided by a qualified teacher and follows correct training methods. Unless a student's level of concentration is continuously maintained through regular meditation practice, mental taints which have been forcibly suppressed by strong concentration will often surge up with greater intensity.

Occasionally a samadhi meditator may realize the truth that all phenomena are ultimately unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) if his wisdom can reflect upon the impermanent and nonself nature of deep concentration states. Usually, however, mental impurities tend to remain quiescent in the mind of a samadhi meditator, which prevents him from seeing the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonselfness. Although a certain type of knowledge may arise from deep samadhi, it is different from the "purification of view" (or "purification of understanding") necessary for completing the insight path. Although samadhi meditation is a wholesome practice, the path of insight leads directly to the wisdom that sees all things as they really are — enlightenment — whereas samadhi does not.

⁵ A Bodhisattva is someone who vows to help all other beings reach enlightenment before attaining it himself. While it is a common ideal in some Mahayana Buddhist traditions, most meditators in the Theravadan tradition do not follow this ideal, preferring to practice directly for their own enlightenment, while still helping others as much as possible.

Developing Meditation Skills

Practicing insight meditation develops mindful awareness of one's own bodily and mental processes and a strong, precise mental clarity. Meditation is not the goal, but a vehicle that enables wisdom to arise.

Meditators are often discouraged during the early stages of practice when they realize they are experiencing greater mental and physical pain than ever before. Becoming disheartened and lacking proper guidance, many of them abandon the training or continue meditating in a haphazard manner, with little sign of progress. This unfortunate situation may prevail for some time, even years. It is possible for mental imbalances to result from such mismanaged practice. Intelligence should be used in one's practice at all times. When developing the mind through meditation we should aim for gradual but steady progress, without trying to force our experience to fit a preconceived idea of what "should" happen.

Many students find that their minds are initially resistant to vipassana training. When the rope of mindfulness is finally applied, the mind struggles to get free of it. Applied too tightly, strain is bound to result; applied too loosely, the mind drifts away. As always, the middle course is the best way to practice. It is at this crucial, initial stage of training that meditators who are experiencing unusual difficulties need to seek out competent guidance.

Meditation practice follows the same principles that govern the mastery of any skill. For most meditators, step-by-step training assures steady, sure progress. Only a few people with keen understanding are able to practice so-called "shortcuts." The cultivation of the mind requires the utmost determination. It takes a courageous attitude not to abandon the training in the face of inevitable challenges: confusion, boredom, restlessness, temporary physical discomfort, and one's own resistance to looking deeply into the hidden areas of consciousness. We want to escape looking at ourselves. But where can the mind truly escape to?

Do You Have Seven Days?

Most students will realize some degree of development after practicing vipassana uninterruptedly for seven days in an intensive meditation retreat.⁶ Many meditation centers in the West offer residential meditation courses designed for intensive vipassana practice.

⁶ A meditation retreat is a period of days or weeks devoted exclusively to vipassana meditation. For that pre-determined time one gives up all other activities including work, enjoying entertainments, and engaging in conversation, and spends the entire day meditating.

Progress in insight cultivation is delayed by repeatedly stopping and starting. The spiritual faculties of confidence, energy, concentration, mindfulness and wisdom need *continuous development and balance* to see the birth of insight-knowledge.⁷ Just as athletes have to scrutinize the training process in order to train most efficiently, meditators need to develop a firm foundation in order to learn how to practice as correctly and thoroughly as possible.

Insight meditators should be aware of their commitment to this mental training and not proceed if they lack confidence. It is important for students to search out and correct areas of confusion or doubt before beginning an intensive retreat.

In the event a meditator wishes to terminate intensive practice and resume it at another time, when he begins again he will start from the previous level of experience or realization.

The Primal Insecurity

Insight-knowledge about the unsatisfactoriness of life arises spontaneously and intuitively. This realization of truth differs, however, from knowledge that comes from thinking about the readily observable facts of birth, sickness, old age and death. These facts of existence reflect the conventional teachings of the Buddha. But in truth the stresses of life are not restricted to unpleasant mental and physical conditions. On a deeper level, when the Buddha spoke about unsatisfactoriness or disharmony (*dukkha*), he was referring to the much more subtle truth that *all* phenomena, even pleasant ones, lack the quality of “stayingness.” That is the primal insecurity.

The acknowledgment of this uncertain aspect of existence is the gateway to deeper levels of insight-wisdom. Most of us have not fully penetrated the profound magnitude and significance of our own primal insecurity, and therefore suffer from unhealthy and imbalanced attitudes. All unliberated beings have this dis-ease. The root causes of pain — craving and attachment — have not been completely exposed and eliminated. By practicing vipassana, however, meditators can experientially discover the truth about the world and themselves.

Most people are content with a superficial knowledge of spiritual truth. Convinced that any significant development is beyond their capacity, they settle for a shallow practice and, therefore, have shallow realizations. Let us not be so skeptical of our potential for spiritual evolution. We should not waste this precious and rare human birth. The teachings of the Buddha are meant to be

⁷ “Insight-knowledge” is synonymous with “insight-wisdom,” but “wisdom” refers to the highest degree of insight, whereas “knowledge” is a broader term. The Buddhist texts describe sixteen levels of insight-knowledge.

lived. Even though the Buddha passed away more than 2,500 years ago, those years have not obscured his timeless path. Down through the ages the Buddha's ever-ready invitation has been for all beings to personally "come and see" the truth. No matter what our circumstances in life, each of us can take this journey.

Health, Sensuality and Mind-Training

Many of the Buddha's disciples had previously practiced self-mortification in the misguided belief that by harming the body they could free the self.

The Buddha practiced self-mortification for a long time prior to becoming enlightened, but abandoned that method upon realizing it was not useful. However, he did permit some disciples to follow a few ascetic disciplines if they believed such methods would benefit their spiritual practice. These exercises were not punishments for the body, but techniques conducive to freeing the mind of its coarser qualities, which were then totally eradicated through insight meditation. Some examples of these methods were: living outside in the forest or in a cave; eating only one meal per day; and mixing all one's food, both sweet and savory, together in a single bowl. The practitioner had to guard his mind to prevent pride, conceit and repulsion from arising.

The temporal physical body, which is of great concern to us, is by nature transitory, liable to suffering, and, ultimately, not entirely within our control. Our identification of this fragile body as the "self" is so deep-seated that we sometimes go to extreme lengths to preserve its health and transient attractiveness, lavishing more attention on it than on the more important, but invisible, mind.

Of course, the Buddha and his disciples attended to their physical needs as conditions allowed. The body had to be kept in reasonably good condition in order to practice the teachings to their utmost and help others. From time to time the Buddha and all his disciples experienced physical pain. But the Buddha himself, and those disciples who had cultivated their minds to a high degree, did not suffer the burden of fear and anxiety when in pain. When illness occurred they sought proper treatment, but their minds remained undisturbed, regardless of the outcome of the disease.

The Buddha taught that in order to become free of suffering one must avoid the two extremes of self-mortification and indulgence in sensual pleasure, which he called the Middle Way. The principle of the Middle Way involves being intelligent with regard to sensuality. By examining the motivations for our conduct and the benefits to be gained from self-restraint we can avoid much

distress. Without moderation in our lives the spiritual path will deteriorate and may even be destroyed completely. On the other hand, forcibly suppressing feelings of sensuality before we are ready to let go of them naturally can disturb the mind, eventually manifesting as abnormal behavior that could be harmful to oneself and others.

Once an ailment has been diagnosed, the proper medicine should be administered so healing can take place. If the medicine is too strong it will poison the system; if too weak, it may relieve the symptoms but not effect a lasting cure. If we take the wrong medicine, it will have no effect or may induce another illness.

In Buddhist practice there are effective meditations for curbing sensuality and anxiety about the body. Depending on the specific problem, these “medicines” can be adapted for the individual student.

Moral Conduct the Foundation

Moral conduct is the basic foundation for the meditative life. The Buddha, however, was not a Commandment-giver or a judge of others’ behavior. The Buddhist teachings were designed to demonstrate the relationship of cause-and-effect, and the great benefits of moral conduct to oneself as well as to others. By exercising restraint in our behavior we gain invaluable peace of mind.

Buddhism teaches individual responsibility for our actions. The more progress we make in insight meditation, the better equipped we are to see how our daily activities lead us nearer to or farther away from our spiritual goals. Once we develop wholesome attitudes and are freed — at least to some degree — from the weight of anxiety and confusion, the mind can remain stable regardless of the inevitable ups and downs of daily life.

Cultivating nobility of character is an indispensable tool in reshaping the confused and restless mind. Truly humane living occurs when the coarser elements of the mind are transformed into the healthy qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathy for others, and equanimity.

If moral behavior is to be deeply transformative, we need to understand why it is necessary. Shame and fear of disgrace are the superficial restraints imposed by society for controlling behavior. But when we understand the benefits of self-restraint as a basis for mind-development, we will sincerely try to avoid such mental poisons as anger and jealousy, as much as we would avoid swallowing a deadly substance. The Buddha taught that unwholesome behavior inevitably leads to unhappiness

and a disturbed, agitated mind, but wholesome behavior leads to ease and happiness.

Removing ourselves from society and cultivating wholesome qualities of mind in a meditation retreat can be very beneficial for a time. But this does not mean we should avoid life or its responsibilities. Life's challenges need to be faced squarely. The advanced meditator carries the "island" of the meditation retreat inside his heart, allowing him to be inwardly calm at all times, even during the crises of daily life.

If we are truly committed to vipassana practice, every life-situation becomes a teacher. As meditation training progresses the rough edges of our personalities are gradually smoothed. The mind is made pliable and ready for work in the midst of everyday affairs.

Practicing the Precepts

The Buddhist precepts for lay people are training rules for the voluntary abstention from killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants. Only when a person is far advanced on the path do the precepts become so firmly established in his mind that he follows them spontaneously. The rest of us have to make effort to abide by them, and we will sometimes make mistakes.

The Buddhas and the fully-enlightened ones (arahants)⁸ became permanently, naturally virtuous. Because they upheld the precepts spontaneously, there was no need to take formal vows regarding their behavior. Although the arahants continued to fulfill their duties to the community, they lived with equanimity, without attachment to the ups and downs of daily life. Their virtue was selfless and pure. Realizing that nothing in the world actually belonged to them, they lived to benefit others.

Practicing the precepts is essential for personal fulfillment and the orderly functioning of life. But not even the most rigid adherence to the precepts will bring about liberation if one lacks wisdom, i.e., insight into the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonselfness of all existence, and the understanding that penetrates to see the Four Noble Truths.⁹

⁸ Buddhas and arahants are beings who have completely purified their minds, having eliminated all unskillful mental qualities such as craving, anger and delusion. They are said to be fully enlightened, meaning, they perceive reality as it is with complete clarity.

⁹ The Four Noble Truths constitute the fundamental Buddhist teaching. For a description, see "A Note on the Word Dhamma" at the beginning of this book.

A period of intensive insight meditation is a special opportunity to naturally practice the precepts and the entire Noble Eightfold Path.¹⁰ In fact, insight meditation is the highest form of cultivation of this Path. During a meditation retreat a student develops right understanding, right livelihood, right mindfulness and right concentration. At this time mindfulness governs all his activities, whether of body, speech or mind. Delusion cannot arise when the mind is protected.

Fundamentals of Meditation Training

Meditators often believe that a special talent is needed for correct vipassana practice. Actually, everyone who makes the effort will receive some benefit from meditating, even if that benefit isn't immediately apparent.

Newcomers to meditation need to begin with a fresh mind, proceeding as though they were learning a new skill. This skill can become an art to be practiced throughout one's life.

A novice meditator sometimes believes he should work with the most famous meditation teacher possible, even during the initial stages of practice. However, such a teacher may be impossible to locate. A new student should work with the most competent instructor available in order to learn the fundamentals of insight practice. It sometimes happens that a beginner seeks out a highly experienced teacher, but the student is not fully prepared. In that case, time and energy will not be used properly. The student might misinterpret and distort the instruction simply because the range of teaching presented is too advanced. A few instructors, however, teach both new and advanced students.

In my style of teaching, before a student begins to practice I try to discover why he wants to meditate. I also try to learn necessary information about an individual's background and inclinations. One type of person may need to study the theory before he has sufficient confidence to begin practicing. On the other hand, too strong a desire to acquire intellectual knowledge beforehand may cause a mental barrier and delay a student's progress. Another type of student may exhibit excessive enthusiasm for meditating and prefer only minimal study of the fundamental principles.

Meditation is the greatest adventure, but in practical terms the traveler begins the journey oblivious to the obstacles that will be encountered. Neither academic "armchair" traveling or going it alone will take the meditator safely to the destination. Again, the middle course is the most appropriate.

¹⁰ The Noble Eightfold Path consists of: right view, right concentration, right mindfulness, right livelihood, right action, right effort, right speech, and right thought.

Teachers and students need to be honest with each other. Considering how long we have been slaves to our mental afflictions, quick results should not be expected. In fact, it is normal for greater confusion to appear when developing any new skill.

In my way of teaching, attention should be focused on: learning the fundamentals of insight meditation, working individually with the teacher, training without stress, and finding skillful means of bringing the practice into daily life. Meditation practice is similar to constructing a building: we can't build a skyscraper without a solid foundation.

Setting up the Practice

Before traveling to a new country, one has to make plans. Even though a traveler may rely on the help of an experienced guide, it is still his responsibility to prepare himself as fully as possible before beginning a journey. Likewise, before practicing vipassana intensively, one has to prepare.

An intelligent meditator sets out to find a reliable method and a guide who is familiar with the training. In addition, he looks for the following:

- Detailed instructions.
- A way to recognize and escape dangers.
- A way to practice safely in order to reach the correct destination.
- A technique for applying the results in daily life.

He also tries to learn whatever theoretical background is essential to know before beginning to meditate.

It is only through personal investigation of the Buddhist teachings that our doubts can be resolved and the path cleared. By fulfilling the above requirements and making a balanced effort, a meditator can avoid disappointment and discouragement. He will also avoid erratic practice, which only wastes time and energy.

Without being overly dependent on a teacher, most meditators will find it necessary to associate with an instructor who can explain the essentials of practice, correct initial misunderstandings, respond to questions, and offer support in every way.

The Indispensable Factor

The Buddhist teachings emphasize the need for *commitment to continuous and correct practice*.

The fruits of meditation and the spiritual life will not mysteriously appear without constant watchfulness and development. The Buddhist devotee is repeatedly urged to

cultivate meditation and other aspects of the spiritual life in an appropriate, skilled manner.

When I was a young novice¹¹ my instructors spent many years teaching me the principles of Buddhist philosophy and meditation. All my instructors, especially my first teacher, continually emphasized the importance of devotion and continuity in the training. After hearing these admonitions year after year, I became bored and impatient. A few years later I became an instructor myself and taught for some time. Realizing I had only “book” knowledge, I decided to practice intensive, uninterrupted vipassana meditation for seven months. I finally understood my teachers’ intentions and their great kindness.

The more devoted a meditator is to practicing continually, without tension or laxness, the more certain he will be of moving closer to final liberation.

Continuous Practice

When we truly see the necessity for cultivating the mind, we will realize that mental training can take place anywhere. Self-cultivation can continue *all the time*. To break training does not occur to the meditator who fully comprehends the implications of mind-development. When we decide to become seriously committed to the practice we will not think of mental cultivation as something confined to the formal sitting posture or requiring a special environment, or as an activity that can only be done in the company of like-minded friends.

We should try our best to stay wide awake in the midst of all sights, sounds and experiences. With this attitude we can begin genuine development in vipassana, because we will understand that the aim is not to grasp or cling to any circumstance in life, while at the same time using skillful means to fulfill our responsibilities. Then our lives will really be free and unburdened from moment to moment. Insight meditation in daily life is cultivated by developing the art of non-attachment.

Meditation Methods

Because personalities and inclinations differ, no single method of meditation is suitable for everyone. Even two students of the same teacher may be shown the technique in different ways and follow different routines. There are many variables in selecting a proper meditation method. They include the teacher’s skill and his knowledge of a student’s background and capabilities.

¹¹ A novice is a temporary rank held prior to becoming a monk.

The fundamental principles of the practice, however, are the same for everyone. All genuine vipassana techniques use our own body-mind processes as objects for mindfulness. When a student fully comprehends the training principles, he can develop sound practice habits. Regardless of the exact method chosen, every student must make sure he understands the most important point in insight meditation practice: *how to focus correctly and completely on mind and body objects as they arise and disappear in the present moment.*

Any meditation method is simply a training device used to learn a new skill. Methods are only *vehicles*. A meditator should not become attached to them. A method is likened to a raft that helps the meditator reach the opposite shore, Nibbana.¹²

Evaluating Progress

During an intensive meditation retreat, especially at certain stages along the path, it is almost impossible for a meditator to evaluate his own progress. That's because his mind is directed toward being continuously mindful of all activities, which does not leave any opening for self-reflection.

Feedback from a qualified teacher is an essential element in insight meditation. It is the teacher's duty to be aware of the correctness and strength — or lack thereof — of a student's practice. After the student has been meditating for some time, an appraisal is usually made so he can know to what degree he has developed. This is commonly done in the vipassana centers of Southeast Asia. It is especially necessary when the student feels that his meditation has not been going well. In fact, he may actually be progressing.

Meditation training should not proceed blindly. Obstacles in the path can be so subtle that the lack of proper guidance and feedback can often preclude further development. Such challenges may cause one's practice to regress for an indefinite period. For many meditators, association with an experienced teacher can be the main factor that influences the maturation process, leading to deeper penetration of the truth. Sometimes months or years of nearly fruitless effort can be corrected by the briefest hint from a teacher.

Many of us need guidance in skillfully integrating a meditative lifestyle into our daily activities. Until the day we are cut loose from neurotic attachments altogether, our good friend the meditation teacher is a valued companion on the journey.

¹² Nibbana, complete freedom from suffering, is the ultimate goal of vipassana meditation. The Sanskrit word is "Nirvana." "Extinction of greed, extinction of hatred, extinction of delusion: this is called Nibbana" (S. XXXVIII. 1).

No “I-Involvement”

If we could focus precisely on the present moment during vipassana practice there would be no “I-involvement.” The mind would be unable, for example, to classify objects coming into our range of vision. Sound, which is simply air waves entering the ear and causing vibration, would not be objectified as speech or music. In fact, it is possible to focus on the split-second between the act of hearing a sound and the instant of naming it.

The conventional interpretation of sense-data is necessary, of course, for functioning in the world. During vipassana practice, however, insight sees the phenomenal reality behind the labels that we give to bare sense impressions. Why is this important? Our usual way of interpreting sense data leads us astray because we cling to what are actually constantly-changing phenomena. The error is further compounded by superimposing negative or positive qualities on the act of bare sense-perception. Knowing life as it really is does not mean that the past and the future are forgotten, or that we live in a strange way. We continue to live normally, but we’re aware that life takes place in the flowing stream of the present moment.

The Buddhas and the arahants experienced the same day-to-day world we do, but they viewed so-called beautiful or unattractive forms impartially. They were not deceived by external appearances. They did not cling to an apparently pleasant experience or reject an unpleasant one. Practicing insight meditation reveals a world never known before: our private world of the mind-and-body.

The Truth of Non-Ego

During meditation practice the body and mind may seem to disappear, and only the breaking-up or dissolution of mind-moments is known by the meditator. At such times the self cannot be found.

With the dawning of this experience we truly begin to understand many aspects of the Buddhist teachings. What is experienced then is not the Dhamma found in books. It is not the Dhamma of words and opinions, or another person’s expression of the truth.

For the person who experiences deepening insight, life goes on rather normally, but with a difference. When something in life is not obtained, little or no disappointment arises. Such a person understands that nothing in the world actually belongs to “me.” This awareness allows him to live with grace, always at ease.

The truth is, we have been living in a prison of our own delusion. Now we can begin to understand the nature of life and leave that prison. We can attain freedom.

A Parched Field

An early stage of insight-knowledge exists which leaves the meditator strangely restless. This uneasiness is peculiar to the dawning of insight-knowledge and has no worldly parallel. A sense of amazement appears as though seeing, for the first time, the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of the world. There were intimations of this before, of course, but now a deeper realization dawns.

Loneliness suddenly descends. Life seems tasteless, dry and dull. There is nothing in the world in which we can place our trust. A profound desolation, sometimes approaching oceanic proportions, may be acute for a time, and the meditator feels isolated from the rest of the world.

Rebellion is a likely response at this stage. It may seem useless to continue the practice; indeed, some students have a strong desire to quit the training.

During this crisis a teacher can advise the meditator, pointing out that mindfulness is being lost by concentrating on this feeling of estrangement. When the meditator understands that these emotions are a natural part of the maturation process, the temptation to abandon the training will be put to rest and practice can be resumed.

Fears and Memories

A new student may find that strong fears or uncomfortable memories, previously buried in the mind, suddenly emerge during meditation. If he is resolute enough not to succumb to anxiety, the meditator will be able to cope with these challenges.

Beginning practitioners who experience fear or distressing memories during practice can respond by changing the meditation object. For instance, they can practice walking meditation instead of sitting. Opening the eyes may also help. Vivid memories or fears are mental objects too potent for a fragile mindfulness to observe clearly. Only the well-developed mindfulness of an experienced meditator can release the mind from the tyranny of memory or deep-seated anxiety.

If memories or fears emerge which reflect long-standing or severe emotional trauma, a meditator can temporarily use a concentration technique in order to control the excess emotion. Unless a meditator applies this remedy, his progress could be halted indefinitely. Fears and memories which dominate a beginner's

practice will gain power and repeatedly return to test his endurance. A teacher can help a student gain concentration quickly in order to overpower these anxiety states. Once successful in reducing the power of these emotions, the level of concentration has to be reduced so mindfulness can gain strength and insight meditation can be resumed.

Pseudo-Enlightenment

When first beginning vipassana practice, students have to contend with the hindrances of sensual desire, ill will, laziness, restlessness and doubt. When the meditator progresses beyond the initial stages of training, he will be tested by more subtle mental games. These challenges along the path are called the *imperfections of insight*. Though not in themselves defects, they may become the basis for clinging, and for subtle feelings of pride and conceit.

There are ten imperfections of insight: a vision of light; a feeling of rapture, tranquility or bliss; exaggerated confidence, energy, mindfulness, knowledge, or equanimity; and a feeling of gratification.

Some meditators reach a plateau where total peace and emptiness prevail, and wrongly think they have realized enlightenment. These students may ask the teacher to release them from meditation practice. Others take great pride in believing themselves to be “good meditators.”

Rare, indeed, is the meditator who is able to self-monitor his practice at this level. Most students will hardly realize that attachments are being formed. The inability to progress further in vipassana is often linked to attachment and delusion at this developmental stage. Feelings can easily fool us. We need to stay awake. Above all, we shouldn't let deluded feelings control our meditation practice.

Teachers and Techniques

Insight meditation teachers can be as different from one another as their students and their techniques. Many of the great meditation masters of the past, whether monks, nuns or laypeople, taught not only by direct instruction but also by example — being themselves people with fully-developed spiritual lives. Very often, accomplished meditation masters did not know how to articulate the mechanism of their practice and would be at a loss as to how to describe a certain method. Others denied having a method at all. They might have had only the vaguest notion of the details of their practice.

Their skills lay in applying their realizations to the art of living. Insight-wisdom was often realized merely by repeatedly looking at their own mind-and-body processes. More formal methods of practice, as we know them today, were developed later.

Since the realization of spiritual knowledge is a solely personal experience, no two people can reach a stage of intuitive wisdom in an identical manner. Just as no two faces are exactly the same, so it is with meditation techniques. Two instructors may give the same method, but their teaching styles will vary slightly due to differences in temperament.

A meditation teacher might develop a particular method and later teach it as a basic practice to his students. It would necessarily be founded on some aspect of the four foundations of mindfulness or the *vipassana bhumi* (the “grounds for establishing insight.”¹³).

Although teaching styles differ, a good vipassana teacher should be familiar not only with general Dhamma practices and the principles of insight meditation, he should also have had personal meditation experience, have some knowledge of Buddhist metaphysics, and have undergone teacher-training under an experienced instructor. I believe this training is an essential grounding for a vipassana teacher. Such educational requirements and practical experience serve as a safeguard to students. While it is not essential that meditators themselves make an exhaustive study of these areas, it is imperative that vipassana teachers do so if they are to help their students effectively.

Teachers who have had this training will be able to keep their instruction in focus and offer the meditator the highest level of teaching. Such training also prevents distortion of the teachings, superficial instruction, and commercialization of what is a spiritual discipline.

An insight meditation instructor does not necessarily need to be a highly realized meditator, but he must be able to practice correctly in order to demonstrate to the student, in practical terms, the complete meditation technique. After his enlightenment the Buddha did not have to practice meditation in any formal way, yet he and his arahant disciples were often observed in meditation. Their conduct and discipline served as examples to others of the path that each of us must follow to final liberation.

While it is beneficial to work with a teacher of long experience, the crucial factor is a clear understanding of and expertise in applying the principles of insight meditation. The Buddha recommended that a teacher and student observe

¹³ See Glossary.

each other over a considerable period of time. Only long association will reveal if the teacher and student have made the right choice.

A meditation instructor who is suitably prepared and has wide experience is capable of assessing the needs of the student. The dedicated teacher will aid the student in cultivating other areas of spiritual growth. He will also try to help the meditator avoid any exaggerated behavior or aberrant practices.

Teaching insight meditation is a task requiring considerable skill. The instructor of general Dhamma principles may be an excellent guide and even a skillful meditator, but may not be competent in offering precise meditation instruction or influencing the meditator's development due to a lack of teaching experience.

The best teachers are always willing to learn from their students. They reflect on their own behavior and standards of teaching, and maintain their own meditation practice. They also review their duties as teachers and try to keep the teaching of insight meditation pure, preserving the tradition as it has been transmitted from one teacher to the next. Instructors who value the transmission of the Dhamma will try to find finer and better ways to express the teachings.

It is rare these days to find well-taught and experienced vipassana teachers, even in the East. Insight meditation is at a critical point in its history. Rather than relying on the fame of past masters, let us try to establish the fundamentals of this liberating training around the world, so that new skilled teachers will be available to future generations.

Mastering the Mind

We can test our growth and commitment to mental cultivation by asking ourselves a few simple questions every day:

- What am I thinking, feeling, or doing *now* — at this very moment?
- Am I alternately locked into memories of the past and living in my imagination, or am I keeping my attention in the present?
- How can I find skillful ways of correcting any imbalance?

When our understanding begins to mature, *everything* we do in life will be performed with clarity. The guarded mind is the safe and secure mind.

After having practiced insight meditation correctly for some time, we will be able to see an improvement in our daily life — a new ease in our interaction with friends, family and everyday situations. If this new freedom does not occur, we need to use wisdom to correct our understanding.

Cultivating what is called “skillful means” allows us to escape the trap of mental entanglements. If we can continue being mindful of the mental process, we will be free to go on our way without creating difficulties for ourselves. Even when the unavoidable problems of daily life occur, we’ll be able to cope with them without becoming angry or despondent, and life will get much easier.

Practice in Everyday Life

As meditators, one of the greatest challenges we face is applying the practice to our interpersonal relationships and the activities of daily life.

With progress in insight meditation our lives will begin to change. If we have had a somewhat careless attitude towards life, we will become more circumspect, showing more compassion and patience towards others. Looking more carefully at the motivations behind our behavior, we will begin to live more skillfully. We will be more watchful of sensory impressions as they bombard the mind, and a bit more observant of emotional states. Some meditators find their habitual emotional responses slowing down. We will be able to detect what we think, feel, say and do more clearly. Instead of rushing hastily into a situation, we’ll pause and reflect on the causes for our actions, as well as their possible effects.

As a result of practicing insight meditation, we will begin to realize that it is not possible to reclaim the past. Sometimes we can make amends for unwholesome past behavior, sometimes not. But either way, we’ll be able to let go of feelings of guilt which may have plagued us for years.

Although we’ll continue to plan for the future, our expectations will be more realistic. Certainly, actions and thoughts will not be clear all the time, but life will begin to take on a different texture. We’ll decide to go on with the practice, confident in the healing power of the Dhamma.

Natural Compassion

Compassion is a mark of genuine spiritual awakening and accompanies every true and deep realization of the nature of life. A deeper understanding of the world’s suffering arises when attachment to the world begins to wane. As we begin to realize that other beings are in the same predicament as ourselves, their pain and bewilderment becomes sharply outlined. All beings are trapped in the web of delusion. When the duality of “self and other” begins to dissolve, we start to see our own pain and hurt in others. Parents might see their own children in the faces of other children.

Whenever the opportunity arises we should always try to help others, in an appropriate manner. When nonself is truly understood we will have no ulterior motive or

intention to gain anything for ourselves. There will be nothing to possess or protect. Even the self-conscious idea of “myself helping” will not arise. Helping will just be the next thing to do. This is true compassion born of realizing nonselfness.

Helping Others

The Buddha and his disciples walked to the far reaches of India, sharing the spiritual treasure they had found with all those who wanted to change their lives. The Buddha understood the magnitude of suffering that beings experience and he looked upon this troubled world with the utmost compassion.

He saw that human beings differed in their capacity to understand the way to emancipation. Some people were not interested in following the path. Others listened, but had no desire to change their lives. A few had partially developed the way, but had then turned in another direction. Only those seekers who had been taught the bitter lessons of life could deeply benefit from his teachings, and only if they had the necessary confidence, made sincere effort, and had proper guidance.

The Buddha compared peoples’ differing levels of spiritual development to lotus flowers rooted in mud but growing up through the water toward the sun. No one knows exactly when a particular flower will bloom. Its life is precarious. As a bud pushes toward the water’s surface it may, for instance, suddenly be snapped off by a sea animal. Still, some buds can be found just above the surface of the water. When the sun warms them, they open in the light.

We may plant the seed of Dhamma in the mind of another person, but we can’t know when that seed will bloom. Since we never fully know the karmic background of another, it can at times be difficult to help. But we can try to aid others in different ways. Sometimes all we can do is listen quietly with our full attention. By maintaining a balanced mind we can assist others with our skillful words and actions. By practicing mindfulness consistently we can avoid getting tangled up in selfish desire when trying to help others.

The Other Shore

The spiritual journey can be described as a leap to the opposite shore of a river. “Leaping” signifies dedicating one’s mind and body to the task wholeheartedly; committing ourselves to this practice with as much determination as that of the first astronaut who leapt from a spaceship onto the surface of the moon.

When a man or woman reaches spiritual awakening, deluded ways of thinking are abandoned. Though life continues rather normally, the mind is free and luminous. This is an ineffable condition, impossible to fully convey to others, just as the astronaut’s experience can never be entirely understood by earthbound people.

The birth of insight is not very far from us, especially when our cultivation of the mind is *continuous* and our resolution firm. There is a saying in Thailand that enlightenment is right under one's nose.

Most of us do not yet have pure, unfettered minds. If we did there would be no need to begin the journey. But clarity and radiance appear spontaneously in the minds of those who are without inner conflict and attachment. It is a goal that every one of us can attain.

The Only Refuge

The Buddha said the Truth should be our supreme teacher, our only refuge. Another person cannot cleanse our unwholesome thoughts or actions, for it is *our own minds* that are confused and generate suffering. If we want to be free of suffering, we have to rely on our own determination. Like a map, the Buddha's teachings show people what direction to go in. But even the Buddha could not induce awakening in his disciples. Likewise, our meditation teachers can only offer instruction to the best of their ability. They can give us a map and help us avoid obstacles, but we have to make the journey ourselves.

The Buddha always encouraged monks, nuns and lay people to cultivate mindfulness. Although the enlightened disciples no longer needed to develop their mindfulness, those of us who have not yet reached awakening need to be aware of the great gift of Dhamma that still exists in the world, and apply ourselves diligently to mindfulness practice.

Here are a few guiding principles for effective training:

- Try to cultivate an awareness of the impermanent nature of existence.
- Follow the middle path of moderation.
- Be on guard against falling into the trap of neurotic attachments.

Remember, we have only this day, this hour, this *moment*.

Chapter Two: The Practice-Path

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the mental activity that observes an object with attention. Mindfulness takes note of whatever object is being experienced or perceived right now, in the present moment, as it arises and falls away. For example, we might be aware of a sound, a sight, a smell, a feeling of itchiness or pain, a thought, an emotion such as anger, and so forth. Mindfulness knows these and other things immediately and clearly, the moment they actually appear, instead of remembering them after the fact.

There are various degrees of mindfulness, similar to different types of camera lenses. A wide-angle lens gives a panoramic view, a medium-range lens shows more precise detail, and a narrow lens targets a specific area in even greater detail. Now think of a film — it is possible to slow down the speed of a film so as to examine each detail of the action. It is this type of precision that is used during the initial stages of meditation training.

Just as a photographer adjusts the focus of a camera to get a sharp image and then closes the shutter, so mindfulness focuses the attention clearly on an object, from the time the object presents itself to consciousness until it disappears.¹⁴

In vipassana meditation there are four kinds of objects for mindfulness to focus on:

1. Bodily impressions. This refers to physical movements and the body's posture, such as standing or sitting.
2. Feelings. This group includes pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations, such as a feeling of physical pain. It doesn't refer to emotions.
3. States of mind or consciousness. For example, the presence or absence of greed, hatred or delusion in the mind right now.
4. Mental objects. This group includes the hindrances to meditation, which are: sleepiness, doubt, ill-will, lust, and restlessness. Emotions, from sadness to

¹⁴ The process of an object's appearing-and-vanishing is quite fast — it can happen in a single moment, a split second.

joy, also fall into this category. The very important five sense-impressions are also classed here: sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile impressions.¹⁵

Note that mindfulness can focus on the mind itself. It does not always have to focus on external objects such as sights, sounds, and so on.

Form Objects and Practice

Everything in our world is form, and it is the mind that perceives it. The mind, which can apprehend both physical and mental objects, experiences form all the time. Form is what enables the mind to know an object. When the mind is functioning normally and attention is directed toward something, the mind is never without some type of form.

According to the Abhidhamma philosophy of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, there are twenty-eight types of form. In vipassana meditation we are mainly concerned with six of them: sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, tastes and mind-objects.

To have a “mind” means to be conscious of, or aware of, something. Physical objects possess no consciousness of their own. Composed entirely of material properties, they have no awareness. The sweetness of sugar and the sourness of lemon are not, of course, experienced by those objects themselves.

Wrong reflection regarding the nature of mental and physical objects causes the birth of delusion — that is, feelings of attraction or repulsion. At one time or another most of us have gotten annoyed at an inanimate object, such as when stumbling over a chair. At that moment the mind irrationally attributes consciousness and intention to the physical object. But if we note the object with bare attention instead, knowing just the fact of seeing or the bare sensation of touching, or if we immediately notice the emotion triggered by the accidental contact with the chair, we will know exactly what is happening. No delusion can take place.

Fortunately, we experience neutral feelings about physical objects much of the time. If we didn’t, our lives would become unbearable. When we understand the true nature of form, our confusion about it can be conquered then and there.

¹⁵ This group can be somewhat confusing, because although it is termed “mental-” or “mind- objects” it includes the five sense-impressions, which are material forms. However, according to the *Buddhist Dictionary*, images, sounds, and so on are regarded as external “bases” or “sources,” “on which depend the mental processes.” Sometimes the fourth foundation of mindfulness is translated as “Dhamma objects.” (Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1988. Also see: http://www.palikanon.com/english/wtb/dic_idx.html).

Isolating the Pure Object of Mindfulness

If insight meditation practice is to proceed correctly, it is vital that students understand how mindfulness should focus on mental and physical objects.

In all my years of teaching I have found that the primary obstacle to progress in vipassana is this: the meditator's inability to clearly distinguish the correct object of mindfulness. Unfortunately, some teachers believe that any object will serve for insight meditation. This is a serious misunderstanding. An insight meditator must be clear about what the right object for mindfulness is.

It is easy, for instance, to say that the sitting posture is a form object, and that mindfulness should focus on the posture. But once a student actually starts to practice, he is often confused about what to do and how to truly focus on the sitting posture. The meditator will generally focus on physical form in the present moment, or on the mind in the present, but not on *mindfulness-knowing-the-posture-from-moment-to-moment, as the posture keeps arising and passing away*.

The correct or pure object of mindfulness is: The act of knowing a material or mental phenomenon in the present moment, from its arising to its passing away. This is the complete and correct object of mindfulness.

Many vipassana meditators, especially those who practice alone, never realize they are not observing the correct meditation object. Mindfulness should note each object, in its separate arising and disappearing stages. Think of watching a ball that's been thrown into the air: one would see it rise up, stop for an instant, and then descend. That's how precisely mindfulness should observe the arising and vanishing stages of the objects observed in meditation.

The mind can only be aware of one object at any single moment. The ordinary mind is a conditioned mind and, as such, can never be without an object. The mind, furthermore, can never be separated from its object when mindfulness is present. Mindfulness is the "glue" which is bonded to the object and is "lifted" with it as the object is acknowledged. Mindfulness constantly keeps the meditation object in focus.

Observing the arising-and-disappearing phases of an object is extremely important. It demonstrates that no one has complete control over an object's appearance and disappearance.

Until the meditator is really clear about what constitutes a correct and complete meditation object, frequent interviews with the teacher are necessary. Without this guidance, meditation training will proceed on a faulty basis. In fact, the meditator may actually be practicing concentration (samadhi) rather than vipassana.

In contrast to concentration practice, in which a single object is focused on, the objects observed in insight meditation change all the time. During insight meditation we are still aware of sense-impressions, and thoughts sometimes arise. Seeing the phenomenal world as it truly is, instead of as it appears to be, does not mean entering a trance-like state in which we are unaware of the sights and sounds around us. In vipassana practice we do not use strong concentration to suppress sounds, tactile sensations, and other sense-impressions. Rather, sense-impressions become “fuel” for mindfulness — phenomena for mindfulness to observe. In this way sense-data become useful by strengthening mindfulness and leading us toward freedom from suffering.

As we correctly and wholeheartedly walk the Middle Path¹⁶ by cultivating insight meditation, we will automatically develop penetrating insight into the Four Noble Truths. At that point, right understanding will harmonize with right mindfulness and right concentration.

Mindfulness and Contact

A vipassana meditator who has a good understanding of the phenomenon of contact will develop a more effective practice in everyday life. We can learn to curtail the entire round of dissatisfaction (the stress-frustration-pain cycle) by being mindful of *initial contact*.

In vipassana, “birth” refers to a new situation emerging in the mind. A birth experience occurs when the mind contacts (i.e., perceives) an object — that is, when a new sight, sound, smell or other sense-impression appears in our field of awareness. For example, suddenly hearing the sound of a dog barking (before the mind gives a name to the sound) is a birth experience. The bare perception of sound at that moment is what is meant by “initial contact.” It is similar to a match striking the friction strip on a matchbox. Fire arises when they make contact.

Inattention to sensory contact gives ignorance (not-knowing) a chance to arise. As soon as sense-contact with an object occurs, a sensation (either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral) appears at once. Whenever we are unmindful, sense-contact immediately causes a reaching out, a grasping and clinging to the sense-impression, which involves delusion. This delusion conditions mental formations. Mental formations, in turn, condition volition. If the volition is based on delusion, then desire or aversion will usually be involved, too. A volition based on delusion will be unwholesome and may lead to unskillful behavior. When grasping and clinging cease, however, there can no longer be a condition for desire or aversion to arise. Ignorance, desire and aversion lead to suffering. When we stop clinging to events and sense-

¹⁶ “Middle path” refers to the Buddha’s Middle Way. In the context of vipassana, the Middle Way means to observe all phenomena with mindful equanimity, without liking or disliking them.

impressions, desire and aversion will not arise, and we will begin to see reality clearly. When the causes of suffering are removed, suffering cannot happen.

In any situation, a meditator can choose how to respond at the moment of initial contact — the moment of first perceiving a sight, sound or other sense-impression. Mindfulness “slows” the mental process down so we can examine it instead of reacting automatically according to habit. When we are mindful as soon as a sight, sound, or other sensation appears we can prevent unhealthy, extreme mental attitudes from developing, which in turn prevents unwholesome behavior. Mindfulness is the brake that stops unhealthy reactions from occurring, reactions which would only lead to more suffering.

In the Buddhist teachings, a volitional action is called *karma*. All forms of volitional action give a result for the one who performed the action; this result is called *vipaka*. A wholesome action gives a pleasant result; an unwholesome action, an unpleasant one. When we’re about to perform an unwholesome action we can remind ourselves of the results that would be caused by it and so refrain from the unwholesome deed, thereby preventing the unpleasant *vipaka* from occurring.

It should be understood that the point at which we make new karma and the moment of reacting to a sight, sound or other sense-impression are one and the same. We can stop the arising of much trouble and confusion in our lives by being mindful at the moment of initial contact with sense-impressions. Instead of reacting by liking or disliking them, which is an unwholesome response, we should simply observe them with impartial mindfulness.

Watching the Sense-Doors

We experience the phenomenal world through our physical sense-organs and the mind. In the Buddhist teachings the eyes, ears and other sense-organs are metaphorically called “doors,” being the avenues through which sense-data enter the field of our awareness. Our eyes, ears, noses and other sense-organs are affected by illness and old age, and at death our perception of sense-impressions fades. Even so, sense-impressions are lifelong companions. But most of us have little awareness of the dominant role played by sense-data in our psychological and spiritual life.

During meditation, mindfulness generally focuses on the body, consciousness or feeling. Only occasionally are most meditators mindful of sensory impressions. However, observing sense-impressions is an extremely important aspect of vipassana meditation.

According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha instructed his disciples to mindfully observe the sense-data impinging on consciousness. The Buddha was not attached to

sense impressions. He knew their true nature and did not become confused due to contact with sense-objects.

Much confusion and suffering are generated when we do not understand the significance of the sense-faculties. Every act of knowing seeing, hearing, thinking, and so on produces a mental state, whether positive, negative or neutral.

A sense object itself cannot give rise to mental impurities. The problem is that we habitually judge objects as agreeable or disagreeable based on past association. This is wrong reflection regarding sense-contact, which allows unwholesome and extreme attitudes to enter the mind. Sometimes we discover these intruders at once. At other times we may be completely oblivious to them. Although the mind cannot linger on any single object very long, an emotional response to a particular sense-impression, when habitually repeated, can result in a dangerous pattern of thought and behavior.

Practicing mindfulness of sense-contact is a short-cut for meditators with keen understanding. It immediately prevents the arousal of unskillful mind-states. The entire round of suffering can be stopped at this point by the highly-developed insight meditator. It is necessary, however, to know which sense predominates at any given moment. Developing this ability takes practice.

Caught up in evaluating the sense-impressions continually coming at us, our minds dart here and there extremely rapidly. Millions of sense impressions scurry across the mind every hour, and we hardly ever notice them as they really are in their bare, unadorned state. But it is possible to do so. An artist, for example, may sometimes experience “pure seeing” — that is, seeing known simply as the act of seeing color, with bare attention, without identifying the visual form as this or that. The seeing will be devoid of interpretation. Occasionally, if there is no attachment to the object, intuitive wisdom can occur.

During ordinary perception, the mind appears to perform a variety of complex acts simultaneously. We seem to see, hear, taste, touch and think at the same time — and it all happens within a few seconds. However, in truth the mind can never be aware of more than one object at any given moment. If we analyze the mental flux, we discover that we cannot see, hear and talk at the same time. It is the incredible rapidity of the mind which gives the illusion of continuity. Moments of consciousness — moments of hearing and seeing, for example — arise and disappear in split-seconds. They are continually being replaced by new moments in succession.

Practicing insight meditation intensively for a period of time is an excellent opportunity to closely observe mental and bodily processes. But be warned: any attempt to “catch” the flux of mind in ordinary life would prove as futile as trying to

count the revolutions of an electric fan that's spinning at maximum speed. Even during intensive meditation practice, we are only aware of the "highlights" of the mental stream.

The Senses in Insight Meditation

The following explanation is a brief study of sensory function as it relates to the practice of insight meditation.

The mind receives sensory data constantly, from which negative, positive and neutral attitudes emerge. In turn, these states of mind generate volitional activity (karma). Meditation practice can proceed correctly when students gain a basic knowledge of sense-perception. If more detailed information is desired, the reader should consult an introductory Abhidhamma text.

Vipassana meditation is concerned with observing bare sensory data, such as color, sound, smell, etc. During meditation the mind should not be concerned with the source of these impressions, nor with conventional names and labels such as "cushion," "dog," "man," "music," and so forth.

In vipassana terms, a bare sense-datum such as a sound or a flavor is a present *reality* while it is being experienced. Mindfulness training is concerned only with the now-moment. By being mindful of the characteristics of sense-impressions we can begin to perceive the true nature of existence. We can then relate to the world in general more skillfully.

Seeing

In order for a complete act of seeing to occur, several things are necessary: 1) a moment of consciousness that receives the visual form, called "eye-consciousness"; 2) a visible object; 3) attention; 4) a functioning eye; and 5) light. The retina, optic nerves, and other parts of the physical eye must be operating normally in order that the "spark" of contact can happen and the mind can register the object. If any factor is missing, the complete act of seeing cannot take place. After an act of pure seeing happens, the mind quickly adopts an attitude toward the object, usually based on past association.

Eye-consciousness can only know color. It can't know any other type of object. Color and shape are material forms known by the mind. The sharpness, smoothness and depth we seem to perceive are only color and shape. Without color, we would be unable to see a painting. But *seeing* color and thinking about it are two different things. When thinking about a color we are knowing a mental form.

Ordinarily, after paying initial attention to an object we give it a name, which is generally recalled from memory. In daily life we need these labels to distinguish one object from another. But if we mindfully note an object with bare attention as “just seeing,” for instance, no specific name can be given. We can’t label it as a “chair,” “painting,” “bicycle,” or anything else.

Being material, the physical eyes do not actually see, but only act as receptors for sense stimuli. Sometimes our eyes might be looking at a pen or a cup and yet we’re unaware of the object. Most of us have had the experience of looking for something which is directly in our line of vision and yet failing to notice it. Consciousness is distracted at that moment and prefers to focus on hearing, thinking, or some other phenomenon.

If we walk into a room and look at a blackboard, what do we really see? Is a blackboard really present? Conventionally speaking, it is present. We see it. However, in the ultimate sense, the English word “blackboard” is only a name for the object. It could have been called anything. Repeated observation reinforces the connection between the bare sense-impression and the word. But ultimately speaking, no such entity as “blackboard” exists. In truth, when color and eye-consciousness make contact, we only see color.

Hearing

The vibrations of a sounding body and space produce sound waves which are carried to the ear. Sound has the characteristic of impinging on the ear. Its function is to be the object of ear-consciousness. Sound is a type of material form. The mind is the agent that knows, or is aware of, sound. If we focus our mindfulness on the act of hearing, we will know that hearing is a mental phenomenon that arises-and-vanishes.

The mind may focus on the meaning of the words heard, on the sound itself (as when listening to music), or on the act of hearing. In all three cases sound is present, but the focus of mindfulness is different. If you pay attention to the internal chatter in the mind, you cannot simultaneously hear external sounds. It is the rapid flux of the mind which gives the illusion that one hears many sounds at the same time.

Smelling

The act of smelling occurs when a fragrance is present. The medium in the case of smelling is the air. Our attention switches to the scent as it makes an impact on consciousness. Fragrance is a material form; the mind is the agent that’s aware of the fragrance. All scents appear and then disappear. Like sounds, they arise and then pass away.

Tasting

The tongue, acting as a sensory receptor, can experience different tastes. Flavor itself is material; the mind knows flavor. The tongue has different areas of sensitivity for detecting sweet, sour and salty flavors. Flavor arises-and-passes-away. Taste is often experienced as a combination of the senses of taste, smell and touch.

Touching

Touching (tactile contact) is a complex subject. The medium in the case of touch is the hardness or earth element in one's own body. In order to feel the hardness of an object, the tactile sense has to be activated. Its function is impingement manifested as the coinciding of internal and external physical phenomena and consciousness. The sensation of touch arises-and-disappears. It is not permanent or constant.

The physical body itself never actually knows or experiences another material object. The sensation of touching something is in truth a mental phenomenon (although it requires a material phenomenon in order to happen). A tactile sensation is interpreted by the mind as being hot, cold, soft, hard, rough, smooth, and so forth.

Although tactile impressions are the grossest, most obvious form of contact, all conscious states have some kind of contact as a component. There are six kinds of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, and mind-contact.

Thinking

More complex than the other senses, ideation is the sixth sense according to the Abhidhamma. Thought serves as an object for the mind. The physical organ, the brain, is the material base. The brain itself does not think. It is not known where thinking actually originates. Like the other sense-impressions, thought arises and passes away.

A thought can be about a mental or a physical object. A mental object might be an idea, an opinion, a memory or a fantasy. For example, I can *think* about the pain I had in my back a few days ago. In this case the thought is based on a mental object (because the pain does not actually exist now; it is just a memory). But if I am *experiencing* the pain in the present moment, any thoughts I have about it are based on a physical object — in this case, the physical body.

Should We Label Objects When Meditating?

In the type of vipassana I teach, a beginning meditator labels the objects he is observing. This is done with a mental note. During walking meditation, for example, the student notes, “placing” when putting the foot down. A meditator silently labels mental and

physical events with the words: “moving,” “thinking,” “hearing,” “seeing” and so on, as appropriate.

But language, although a necessary tool for communication, can be misleading in insight meditation practice. Language is only symbolic. The word is not the thing, nor is the thing the word.

The practice of mentally noting objects is a necessary device for most students in the early stages of meditation practice. It helps the beginning meditator to recognize the object and prevents it from “floating away.” It also helps develop momentary concentration, which supports mindfulness. In daily life, when many phenomena are appearing rapidly in the overactive mind, labeling may sometimes be helpful, provided one is sufficiently skilled in identifying emotional states.

Labeling objects is in truth a concentration practice. The more experienced meditator will notice that the object on which mindfulness is actually focusing is the label, not the object itself. For example, the meditator will be focusing on the *word* “hearing” instead of on the sensation of hearing the sound. The sound will have already appeared and - disappeared by the time mindfulness acknowledges it with a label. For that reason, mental noting should be dropped as soon as we are sufficiently experienced in acknowledging objects.

But we don’t have to deliberately give up the labeling technique at a particular point in our meditation practice, because it will happen by itself. If mindfulness is precise, especially during an extended period of intensive practice, the mind will automatically and naturally stop labeling objects. At that point the mind just “knows” or “feels” what is occurring in the present moment. When mindfulness and concentration are balanced, concepts such as “breathing,” “movement,” and so on will fade away. The meditator will be left with just the phenomenal experience.

Past and Future Suffering

For the ordinary person who has not received mindfulness training, much time and energy is wasted by replaying the scenarios of past events or imagining scenes about the future. To some degree these mental states are useful in ordinary life. In meditation, however, past and future events are regarded as concentration objects, which have no place in vipassana practice.

In insight meditation, only phenomena that are perceived *in the present moment* are considered real and qualify as correct objects for mindfulness. A memory was once real as something actually happening in the present, but it does not exist now because it is no longer happening in the present time.

Likewise, thoughts about a future event are not pure vipassana objects, for the same reason that they are not realities currently happening. To think about the future is to live in the imagination.

When thinking about the past, the object of our attention is a series of thoughts. These thoughts are occurring in the present. Even if an unpleasant feeling is associated with these memories, we are still observing something that does not actually exist, being only a memory. Genuine suffering is only present suffering; that is, it is based on an object that *actually exists right now*, such as an unpleasant sound, smell, or bodily feeling. It occurs when attachment arises and creates an unhealthy, deluded attitude.

Thinking of the past or future during meditation practice should be mindfully noted as “thinking,” “memory,” or “planning” and then let go of. By focusing on objects in this way we can gradually become free of mental confusion and suffering.

The Significance of the Bodily Postures

The body is the first foundation of mindfulness the Buddha gave in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. The section on the contemplation of the body discusses the major bodily postures as objects for vipassana practice. It is due to the Buddha’s genius in discovering the Four Noble Truths that we can learn to see things as they really are by observing that which is closest to us — our own bodies and minds. Meditators will discover, experientially, who or what this “I” is that’s attached to mind and body processes.

The physical body can teach us in many profound and subtle ways. The body can adopt innumerable postures, and can perform all kinds of precise movements. Most of us are aware, in a general way, whether we are sitting, standing, walking or lying down. We might wonder why it is necessary to observe the body’s posture, since we are usually aware of it. But this general awareness is not the same as the precise awareness of posture required in vipassana meditation. If we were truly mindful of the bodily postures in everyday life, the Buddha would not have needed to recommend them as meditation objects.

The marginal awareness of posture that one has in daily life is inadequate for penetrating the three characteristics of mind and matter, which is the objective of insight meditation. These three characteristics are: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonselfness.

In daily life, because we are focused on other things, we are usually unaware of the stresses within the body. Unless ill, tired or confined to one posture for some time, we

are oblivious to the discomfort almost always present in the physical body. In an unconscious response to discomfort we constantly shift our posture, which prevents us from seeing these minute bodily stresses.

The mind is the agent that directs and controls the body's posture. When the body is bent and arranged in a certain specific way, we say it is sitting. The act of sitting is an ordinary, mundane activity of the body. "Sitting" is merely a word describing the activity. In conventional usage, we say that we see someone sit or that we ourselves sit. Sitting is not standing, walking or lying down. It is something else. We can clearly distinguish the different postures from each other. But does sitting itself have any reality in the ultimate sense? In conventional terms, it is true to say that "we sit." In *ultimate* terms, however, there has never been the act of sitting, from the beginning of time to the present, nor will there be in the future.

In the ultimate sense, when we experience ourselves sitting, there is just a particular feeling or sensation known by the mind. When we look at someone else sitting, however, we have a different type of object. In that case we are observing visible form. Whenever we see anything, consciousness is merely aware of color. When we see "a person sitting" we are actually seeing only color.

During vipassana practice, the meditator needs to know how to have a correct and complete meditation object when focusing his attention on bodily posture. A meditator who focuses on the word "sitting," or on the physical body itself, does *not* have the right object for insight meditation. These two are concentration objects.

The correct practice is to be mindful of knowing "feeling" or the bare sensation you have when sitting. In insight meditation, feeling has the special meaning of mindfully knowing an object in the present moment, in its arising-and-falling phases. The mind can know the feeling of the present moment. It can see how that feeling differs from previous moments when, for instance, the body was adopting a different posture. Feeling here does *not* refer to pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations, nor to the emotions. This "feeling" aspect takes some time to recognize. We could call it "just knowing" the bare experience.

When mindfully focusing on sitting, correctly, for half an hour or so, one's mind will continually return to the sitting object. The mind can then separate any attachment to the posture from the posture itself. Mindfulness can know — i.e., be aware of — the sitting posture merely *as sitting*, continually, in the present moment. When

the mind knows that sitting is just a form object, just a phenomenon devoid of self, it can't develop any attachment to the form. If one is observing in this manner, no greed, hatred or delusion can arise. The posture will be understood as "pure sitting." The mind will be clear about the object. It won't be able to make a mistake about it. The meditator will really know, from immediate, personal experience, whether the body or mind suffers.

To speak of the world as filled with things and happenings is true according to conventional truth, but in ultimate terms, none of us has ever seen, tasted, touched, or thought any thing whatsoever, at any time. What we call our present existence is only conventionally or relatively true. All of the objects in the world are mundane and subject to change. In the ultimate sense, this world is nonself, empty and void.

Contemplation of the Body in the Body

Each of us has a body in two senses: 1) an external body, and 2) an internal body. The external body is made of chemical elements and unites us not only with the rest of humanity but with all forms of existence, since we share certain characteristics with all animal and vegetable life.

The Buddha's teachings center on the more elusive internal body, which, when correctly observed, reveals ultimate truth. In the section entitled "Contemplation of the Body" in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha said: "Thus he lives contemplating the body in the body internally." Since contemplation of the body is the primary foundation for vipassana practice, let us examine the significance of the phrase "the body in the body internally."

Buddhist commentators have interpreted this instruction in several different ways. In my opinion, the "body in the body" does not refer to a certain physical organ or a mental form. It refers, rather, to the activity of the physical body. The body cannot move by itself. The mind must order it to move. Most physical movement results from a mental intention. A willed movement is a karma — an intentional action — which produces a result in the future. If a bodily movement is prompted by an unwholesome intention such as greed or hatred, it will yield an unpleasant result for the one who performed it. Being mindful of "body in the body" actions is a very practical and important instruction by the Buddha. It serves to protect the mind, both in the present and the future.

A “body in the body” action refers to a single specific movement. Consciousness is aware of a separate action occurring in the present moment as the mind orders the body to move. For example, suppose a person raises his hand and strikes someone. This is a volitional action prompted by an unwholesome, angry mind. The action is an example of “the body in the body.”¹⁷

Furthermore, such an action is a “seed” that bears fruit later on. We should explore the cause and effect process of karma if we wish to know why certain events occur or how dissatisfaction comes about, especially if we want to learn how to apply a remedy.

Think of a fruit on a tree, and its seed. A pear seed, for example, lives protected by the fruit around it. The flesh of the pear eventually decays and disappears. The remaining seed, if left to germinate under suitable conditions, will sprout and grow into a new tree. If there were a seedless fruit, the disappearance of the edible flesh would be the end of things.

When our physical body dies, the “seeds” of our past unwholesome actions and mental impurities cause a new round of existence to grow, because the mind’s seeds have the potential to cause rebirth. For the Buddha and the arahants, on the other hand, there were no mental taints left to cause a new birth once their physical bodies had perished.

Correcting Mistakes in Practice

An insight meditation teacher not only has to know what objects a student is observing, but also *how* his mind is focusing on them. This feedback is an important component of the student-teacher interview.

There are a number of incorrect ways of practicing vipassana. The most common mistakes are:

- Focusing on corporeality, such as the physical parts of the body. Matter cannot by itself cause mental impurities, because it is unconscious, unaware of anything. The Buddha taught that the cause of suffering is in the *mind*, not the physical body. In vipassana we only pay attention to objects that have the potential to make mental impurities arise.

¹⁷ More strictly speaking, “body in the body” refers to the internal condition or arrangement of elements that occurs as a result of the movement of the external body. It appears immediately from a mental volition in the present moment.

- Repeating a mantra, or otherwise focusing on the meaning of words.
- Using visualizations as meditation objects.
- Counting the breaths (which is actually to focus on words). This and the previous two errors are ways of developing concentration, not insight.
- Mentally focusing on the words “rise” and “fall,” instead of observing the actual abdominal movements when breathing in and out. Also, focusing on the mental notes for the movements, such as “lifting” or “placing” when doing walking meditation. (However, as mentioned earlier, most beginners need to label movements and other meditation objects with a mental note, as a temporary training device.)
- Focusing on the movement of the foot and simultaneously coordinating the breath with the steps during walking meditation. It is not possible to be mindful of two objects at the same time. When walking, observe the movement only.
- Being vaguely aware of the abdominal movements, or the air striking the nostrils, or the walking movements, without focusing on their arising-and-disappearing aspect.
- *Thinking* about a meditation object, whether the abdominal movements, walking, the posture, or another phenomenon, without actually focusing on that object in the present moment. Thinking about an object is not genuine vipassana practice.
- Acknowledging an object *after* it has fallen away. Mindfulness should know only what is occurring in the present moment.
- Trying to “catch” the mind itself. Mindfulness will then be ignoring the present-moment object — the immediate experience of seeing, hearing, moving, and so on. Due to its rapid flux, it’s impossible to catch the mind.

Chapter Three: Questions and Answers

Establishing the Practice

Q: What does a new student need to know before beginning a vipassana retreat?

Achan: A meditator needs to know that mental and physical phenomena are the *only* correct objects for mindfulness. A person cannot practice correctly without knowing the mental and physical states appearing in consciousness, from moment to moment, in the present time. The meditator needs to give thorough attention to these objects as they arise and then disappear, one object at a time.

Q: Some students prefer to study the Dhamma before beginning to practice; others wish to start meditating immediately. Which course is best?

Achan: A student should have some knowledge about the Eightfold Path, the meditation objects used in vipassana practice, and a minimal understanding of sensory perception. It only takes a short time to learn the basics. When studying this theory with an instructor, the teacher and student have an opportunity to become better acquainted. I believe this helps the meditator to practice with confidence. Otherwise there may be confusion, hesitation and fear. A traveler should have a general awareness of the destination, without relying exclusively on the guide. The traveler doesn't have to chart the map over again each time or know every detail, but should just be generally familiar with the territory.

How long to study the Dhamma depends on the student's individual inclination and the time available. Of course, more intense study and training are necessary for the student who wishes to teach meditation eventually. Studying certain aspects of the Abhidhamma will make the practice much clearer and easier for some meditators.

A meditator who wishes to practice directly, with only minimal study, can begin the training at any time as long as he understands what constitutes *correct* meditation practice. Then he can practice without delusion. Every bit of time spent in correct meditation, even five minutes, is helpful.

Practicing vipassana simply out of curiosity, or merely because you have confidence in the teacher, is not very wise, especially if you don't investigate further. Practicing with delusion can make doubts grow as big as a mountain. Skillful investigation, on the other hand, can make even great doubt disappear.

Conserve your time and energy. Many pitfalls exist in training, but the careful meditator will be able to practice with assurance and safety.

Q: Some books give instructions on meditation practice. How helpful is it to rely on books?

Achan: General books on insight meditation have value for the average reader. The bare-bones instruction in a book, however, will not help most meditators very much. The real Dhamma is not contained in books; it is found in your own body and mind. A teacher can help you understand the books. If you practice correctly and then read the books, you'll probably understand them well. In fact, if you practice until you realize a certain stage of development, you will know if the author is writing from personal meditation experience or is only repeating what he learned from other sources.

Q: Can you comment on some of the reasons people practice vipassana?

Achan: Most meditators interested in vipassana training have limited goals. Our temperaments, needs and inclinations differ, but we are all looking for a way to solve problems.

Meditation may be seen as a practical way of enriching one's life or interpersonal relationships. Others may use the vipassana technique to expand their own spiritual tradition. Some use vipassana practice to reduce stress, or as an adjunct to psychotherapy. These reasons for practicing suffice for most meditators and are helpful to many people.

But there are a few people who are committed to real spiritual growth. The Buddha taught the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to those who wished to permanently overcome suffering. These people want to deeply probe the nature of their existence and are willing to face the necessary challenges and self-discipline. The entire body of Buddhist teachings is directed toward the complete elimination of mental pain and suffering. That is the ultimate reason to practice vipassana.

Q: I find it difficult to be mindful even for a few minutes. How can an ordinary person ever hope to realize the attainment of the enlightened disciples?

Achan: Only the fully enlightened arahants are completely free of mental impurities and attachments at all times. Anyone who is committed enough can develop this ability through mindfulness training.

The Buddha and his disciples were mindful of the true characteristics of existence. They had fully comprehended the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and

nonsel. All of us have cultivated unhealthy mental states for so long that it is not really beneficial to think in terms of setting time limits for reaching our goal. In a sense, the training is the “goal.” Mental obstructions arise in the present through unwise reflection on the objects appearing in consciousness. Since mental impurities appear in consciousness on a momentary basis, they can be released in successive moments as well. They appear and vanish; they are not permanently imprinted on the mind. Every moment of mindfulness is a moment of wakefulness.

Q: How can I keep mindfulness more continuous?

Achan: New students of vipassana meditation are usually agitated when mindfulness is lost, especially during intensive practice. They *cling* to mindfulness, creating more frustration and unwholesomeness in the mind. Mindfulness, which fluctuates according to conditions, cannot be manufactured or artificially induced.

Never lose courage, even if you feel your practice is not progressing well. *If you are discouraged, make that mental state itself an object of mindfulness.* It may take some time to learn how to practice. Once you understand insight meditation well, you will not even need great patience. You will gradually see a change taking place in your meditation practice and in your life. Mindfulness is similar to a dam placed at the source of a waterfall. Eventually, the waterfall will cease. So it is with the mind’s obstructions.

Q: Meditation is easier for me when I’m in a group and working with a teacher. When I’m alone, I find it very difficult to practice. How important is the presence of a teacher and a group in developing one’s meditation practice?

Achan: Believing that group practice is superior to solitary practice, or vice versa, is not the point.

The reason a person may feel more comfortable learning in a group, especially with a teacher, is that their presence tends to lighten one’s lack of personal understanding. Whether practicing alone or not, the meditator needs to learn the theory of correct and complete practice of insight meditation. Such knowledge will give him confidence and direction. He can then practice at any time, anywhere.

Coming here in good faith, seeking to share with others is very good, but we shouldn’t depend on others too much. Confidence in the path, based on personal investigation, will help our progress. This investigation is one of the important factors in the search for truth.

Q: We all want happiness and a peaceful mind. Insight training seems a long, hard road. I'm not sure I can make the necessary commitment.

Achan: Discovering your priorities is essential. What do you really want to do? We are constantly searching for a nebulous “happiness,” but somehow nothing seems absolutely right. Our expectations never seem to be totally fulfilled.

Some people might call this training difficult, but “difficult” or “easy” are relative terms. A person’s level of commitment depends on whether he really understands the purpose of meditation.

Exploring the mechanism of frustration, which comes from the mind, will bring relief from unhappiness, because once we understand it we can begin to alleviate it. Scrutinizing the mental process itself will act as a buffer to life’s unpleasant surprises and disappointments. It is possible to completely eliminate the process that results in suffering, *from moment to moment*. Immature ideas of happiness or permanence will be corrected. We *can* live fully and freely in the present moment.

Insight meditation is the essential Dhamma. The Buddha said the way of mindfulness, which is the ultimate practice of the Dhamma, was the *only* way to purify the mind permanently. The word “only” signifies the direct and straight path. He added that it was walked, “for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destroying of pain and grief, for the reaching of the right path, for the realization of Nibbana.”

Each one of us has a decision to make about the course of our lives: whether to observe and thereby purify the mind, or to keep revolving in the world of birth-and-death. The choice is ours.

Meditation and Daily Life

Q: Can you comment on bringing meditation into daily life?

Achan: During daily life we should cultivate *clear comprehension* in regard to thought, word and deed. In other words, we should scrutinize our activities with regard to purpose, aim and suitability. One way to judge whether an activity is suitable or not is to ask whether it will increase the greed, hatred and delusion in our minds or tend to reduce them. If it will increase those unwholesome mental factors, we should refrain from the activity. This is one form of skillful means, the development of which is an aim of the practice. Clear comprehension helps to safeguard the mind.

Q: I'm a salesman. My mind is always racing, thinking of the past and imagining things about the future. I become identified with my role when I'm busy at work. How can I apply vipassana practice to my ordinary work day?

Achan: Try to be aware of the mind *when* it is actually racing. Eventually you'll be able to see many conditions of mind if you persevere. You will know when the mind is scattered, collected, joyous, and so forth. Your main task is to be observant. Watch the mind directly, and unwholesome mental contents will weaken without any direct intervention on your part. But don't get into the habit of clinging to mindfulness. Meditation and mindfulness are only *tools*. True mindfulness might arise spontaneously without intention when performing an activity in daily life. But most of the time in everyday life we can only have clear comprehension. Meditators often think that in ordinary life they can have the same degree of detailed mindfulness they experience during formal meditation, but this is impossible.

Q: How would an enlightened person act in daily life situations?

Achan: In ordinary life, an arahant does not use the type of consciousness he experienced at the very moment of enlightenment. In the Buddha's time arahants returned to ordinary life after awakening, fulfilling their duties in the Buddhist sangha — the community of monks and nuns. It was natural for them to live a celibate lifestyle.

The great lay supporter of the Buddha, the female disciple Visakha, was a streamwinner — someone having reached the first stage of enlightenment.¹⁸ After becoming enlightened she returned to her duties as a householder and appeared the same as an ordinary person, albeit one who had great confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and sangha. But all the time the insight-wisdom she had realized was secure in her heart and mind. Having no anxieties, she did not get upset about the normal and unavoidable uncertainties of life. She lived a free life while still in the world.

The unenlightened mind is clouded by impurities. The enlightened mind has no exaggerated emotion, no clinging, no displays of restlessness and excitability. Sometimes arahants are able to control personality traits developed over many previous lifetimes; at other times they can't control them. For example, there's a story that the Buddha's disciple Ven. Sariputta jumped over a series of canals instead of walking around them, as would befit a dignified monk. When someone complained about this the Buddha explained that Sariputta had been a monkey in a previous lifetime, and the habit of jumping had become very strong. But regardless of how they

¹⁸ There are four stages of enlightenment. Those who have reached the final stage are called "arahants."

seem to others, these habits don't involve any mental impurities. An arahant's mind is always pure.

Q: Isn't it possible to realize the truth in daily life?

Achan: Of course. You can know the truth if you observe life with the eye of wisdom. The Buddhist teachings proclaim two levels of truth. The first is the truth of the mundane world or conventional reality, which makes possible the functioning of everyday life. The second is the fundamental truth behind ordinary phenomena. This is the truth realized by insight-wisdom, and it is the truth which liberates us. We need to be able to juggle these two levels and not be attached to or confused about either aspect. Both levels are correct within their separate spheres.

Training

Q: What role do the factors of right speech, right living, right action and right effort play in vipassana practice?

Achan: In this context, "right" means correct, complete, perfect and balanced. During an intensive meditation retreat one's speech is guarded by the mind. The meditator usually speaks only to the teacher. He speaks slowly, mindfully noting each word, keeping to the principles of training. He therefore has right speech at all times.

Except for periods of sleep, right living means that mindfulness is practiced night and day. The factor of right living is complete because one does not lose mindfulness as often as one does in daily life. Mindfulness maintained with *each and every action, excluding no activity*, is right and complete action.

Right effort means nonstop practice, without strain or laziness. Erratic practice occurs when we think of taking a break. It weakens our effort. Sometimes, though, this will happen. Just begin again and again. *Every moment is new*. Don't think about the past or the future.

Q: I guess more meditators are interested in concentration practices than in mindfulness training. Is that right?

Achan: Yes. Both practices are beneficial, but they have different goals. Training in samadhi (concentration) techniques is centuries-old. It is much easier to interest and instruct samadhi meditators. Depending on the capacity of the student, the benefits of concentration practice might appear quite early in training if conditions are appropriate. Vipassana meditators need different instruction and very careful guidance.

Some students of samadhi wish to develop psychic powers, but the meditator needs to possess a high standard of virtue to be successful. Otherwise, the psychic energy

which is unleashed may become destructive to the practitioner and be extremely harmful to others. Depending on the student's background, it can be quite difficult, sometimes impossible, to pursue vipassana meditation after cultivating advanced stages of concentration.

Q: During a meditation retreat I can sometimes practice well. But in normal life I often become confused and emotional and lose my way. What can I do under those circumstances?

Achan: This situation happens to all of us in the beginning. *Watch your mind constantly, regardless of the mental content. Don't be upset by the confused mind. Become an audience to your emotions instead of identifying with them.* These emotions are impermanent and don't really belong to you. Our emotions, including confusion, are the mind's actors showing us many things. Don't jump onstage with them. And certainly don't wrestle with them! Just touch-and-go mindfully.

Q: What is the relationship between the Buddhist moral precepts and vipassana training?

Achan: The precepts are also a foundation for meditation training. Adherence to the precepts protects us from harm in most cases and prevents us from injuring others. Though necessary for social stability, precepts which are observed only through fear of punishment produce a mental burden.

True virtue and harmlessness is born of nobility of character. Then one does not feel the burden of following rules. Virtue serves as the basis of all profitable states. The Buddhist precepts are not commandments, but are considered to be the minimum standard of behavior for all human beings, and they promote humane living. Their boundaries help us to safely negotiate the challenges of everyday life.

The complete and correct practice of insight meditation is the Eightfold Path itself. It is more virtuous and commendable to cultivate the Eightfold Path than to abide by the fluctuating morality of the world. It is only through deep insight and skillful means that unselfishness can be overcome and true wisdom attained. The precepts should be guarded constantly by mindfulness. In a moment's time everything can be lost through carelessness.

Q: Some teachers give detailed explanations about a student's development, but others make very little reference to it. Can you explain why there are these different styles of teaching?

Achan: Practicing a general, more "natural" meditation technique will usually not result in such clear-cut levels of progress as when following a more intensive, step-

by-step method. The latter type of training shows definite stages of progress, similar to the stages of recuperation from an illness as observed by a physician. A meditation teacher will often explain the stages of insight to a student after he has been practicing continuously for some time.

Q: Should concentration be practiced for extended periods of time before beginning vipassana practice?

Achan: Any meditation method has concentration as a component. But only momentary concentration is needed for mindfully noting objects as they appear-and-vanish in the present.

There is a classical form of insight meditation, called “mindfulness of the breath” (anapanasati), which can be used as a vehicle for either pure concentration (samadhi) or insight meditation. If a meditator has sufficient time, interest, potential for attaining concentration, favorable practice conditions, and a suitable teacher, this method can be helpful as a foundation practice. There is one great problem for the concentration meditator, however, which is that strong *attachment* might arise when experiencing deep states of tranquility. But some meditators are wise enough to realize they need to let go of attachment to these states.

Q: How can we be certain we are practicing insight meditation and not just concentration?

Achan: When a student begins practicing insight meditation, the first three stages of knowledge tend to fluctuate back and forth. They may also alternate with concentration states. It is at this crucial point that many problems may appear in a beginner’s practice. Only when reaching the fourth stage does unmixed and true insight development begin to occur. This plateau is called the “knowledge of arising and passing away.” At this point certain obstacles called the “imperfections of insight” can be overcome. These are fully described in early Buddhist texts such as the *Path of Purification* by Bhandantacariya Buddhaghosa.

A beginning meditator, unaware of the differences, may inadvertently be practicing concentration even though he believes he is practicing insight meditation. I have seen many, many such cases — the problem is very common. Just as it is sometimes difficult for a recovering patient to monitor the stages of his own recuperation, it is also difficult for the inexperienced meditator to monitor his own practice. The meditator needs the guidance of a qualified teacher.

Q: In vipassana practice I often hear terms such as “effort,” the “cutting off” of mental defilements, and the “control” of the mind. Can you explain these terms?

Achan: Insight meditation cannot occur without effort or energy. Effort does *not* mean applying mental or physical pressure or causing any kind of strain. When learning any new skill, a beginner is often self-conscious and applies too much pressure or is confused and lax. In a sense, effort should be effortless. Effort means going on and on with the practice without giving up. This mode of training comes with experience and relaxation.

In this condition of relaxed effort, mindfulness is still maintained; it has an easy, friendly quality. Touch-and-go. Focus and forget it . . . but don't forget to focus!

It is only a figure of speech to say the mental impurities are “cut off.” Since the mind is abstract, there is no real cutting of the defilements like cutting the roots of a tree.

We cannot control the mind except for certain periods of strong concentration called “absorptions.” We can only *know* mental and physical states as they arise-and-vanish in the present moment.

Q: Please discuss the problem of conceit on the spiritual path.

Achan: Conceit is so deeply rooted in the mind that it is one of the last fetters to be exhausted when attaining enlightenment. We can all recognize blatant conceit, but conceit also appears in subtler forms. As ordinary people it is difficult to know the extent, depth and strength of our own conceit. Buddhism recognizes the existence of inferiority-, equality-¹⁹ and superiority-conceit.

In all walks of life can be found people in authority who are proud of their virtue or expertise, especially if they follow a special code of discipline. Professional religionists often have this problem. Knowing clearly for oneself that one's conceit has not been exhausted is important, because it reminds us that we need to continue practicing. It is the duty of wisdom to exhaust conceit.

Q: Can you talk about spirituality and anger?

Achan: Though anger can sometimes be quite subtle, it is usually a fiery emotion. Anger is often greater than greed since greed may be kept at low levels through practicing the rules of moral conduct.

People who have a regular samadhi practice may sometimes display a strong temper or behave erratically if they permit their practice to slip. Anger and other

¹⁹ Equality-conceit means thinking, “I am equal to so-and-so.” Although inferiority-conceit may sound like an oxymoron, one is still attached to an idea of a self and still obsessively compares oneself with others.

mental impurities only need the right conditions to manifest. If these emotions have been suppressed for a long time by strong concentration, they may suddenly emerge with great intensity. That is the case with true anger, which is indeed a great impediment on the spiritual path.

There is, however, another type of anger. Some of my own teachers, many of whom were quite developed in the spiritual life, occasionally displayed such traits. It is not the type of anger most people normally exhibit. Rather, it is the anger associated with a parent's concern for a child's well-being, or the attitude sometimes expressed by a physician or teacher when wishing to help another person. The person's demeanor may appear unkind, even ferocious, but the mind is pure. The motivation in this case is unlike that of an ordinary person. Little or no unwholesome karma is generated.

But true anger pulls down the entire structure of the training. There are early Buddhist texts that offer practical suggestions for overcoming anger. Anger can be counteracted by fully cultivating the practice of loving-kindness and compassion, together with wisdom. When anger arises in intensive meditation practice one may need to change posture or switch to a different meditation object unless mindfulness is strong enough to focus on the anger as it arises and vanishes.

Only wisdom can fully eradicate the roots of anger or any other mental impurity. First and foremost, we need to abolish ignorance. That is our great task. The majority of our time should be spent usefully looking into our own minds in order to eliminate ignorance.

Q: Can anger and other unwholesome emotions actually be prevented?

Achan: If we can maintain mindfulness and *know* when the object in the mind is unwholesome, negative states will not get a foothold. If anger arises and is immediately followed by a skillful mental state, mindfulness has simultaneously arisen as well. This takes training and practice, but it's not impossible. The Buddha did not ask us to do impossible things.

When we do not know how to "spend" the karmic results of an unwholesome mental state, we can be sure that mindfulness has been lost and delusion arisen. That's why we should always stay wide awake and be on our guard.

Q: Sometimes anger just flares up. At those times, it's almost impossible to be mindful, especially if I am being accused and blamed.

Achan: The Buddha said it is better to be hurt with words than with "sticks and stones." We should strive to accept non-violent blame with as much equanimity as possible instead of being unkind to others. If we lose mindfulness and feel hatred or

anger toward others, we are mentally damaging ourselves. Our anger causes us mental torment. We cannot skillfully deal with the situation. At that time we lack clear comprehension. If we truly wish to practice the Dhamma we should learn to accept everything that happens to us, viewing it all as an opportunity to put the teachings into practice.

We live in a world of karmic consequences. A deluded mind continually makes fresh karma through volitional action — most of it unwholesome. But for the meditator, daily life situations are a training-ground filled with opportunities for creating wholesome karma. When we clearly see life as it is, we can be compassionate and friendly whether or not others accept our goodwill. Others' acceptance of it would not concern us.

Q: While practicing for weeks in an intensive meditation retreat, I find my mind becomes very restless and fiery. Why does this happen?

Achan: The “heating” of the mind is a maturation process, a sign of progress. When practice is developing correctly, the clear mind begins to “burn” the defiling impulses with an energy like heat. Restlessness, the ninth fetter, is extremely difficult to conquer. It arises to test one's practice. Mental taints, which cover the mind, become uncomfortable during the purification process. The mind can be in a terrible condition at that time. Mindfulness cools the defilements, the passions.

Right now the temperature in this room is comfortable. But if you increase the heat to 100 degrees, you'll want to run away. For the mind, however, there is no escape when the defilements are being cooked!

Q: What are some common errors made in Vipassana practice?

Achan: New meditators, especially those having a background in concentration meditation, may believe that the objects in vipassana practice are identical to those used in samadhi meditation. This is a *major* error. Without qualified instruction, most meditators will focus on a single object steadily for some time. They will either disregard or try to suppress other mental phenomena arising in consciousness, which is the way of concentration practice.

Since concentration practice results in a calm mind, these meditators will try to cultivate and expect only pleasant states of mind. This error is often committed by beginners who prefer to keep their attention on the breath at the nostrils, since it is easy to do and comfortable, without noticing the arising-and-vanishing of phenomena. The former practice is calming. If the purpose of insight meditation is not fully explained initially, the meditator will get confused when the teacher wishes to give more vipassana instruction. Also, most meditators believe they have to sit for long periods. This is correct in concentration practice, but *not* in vipassana meditation.

It is important to understand that all meditation objects in vipassana practice are of equal value. You shouldn't think that sitting meditation is better than walking, that eating mindfully is an inferior practice, or that mindfulness can be forgotten when you're walking down the hall.

If you are confused about the practice, ask for guidance. Please don't just sit and walk as a ritual. Try to use your time efficiently and wisely.

Q: At one meditation center, a meditator suddenly became ill. Even though we are in intensive practice, shouldn't we help the person?

Achan: Of course. If necessary, you may lose your moment-to-moment mindfulness for the sake of compassion! The teacher and assistants are responsible for the care of all meditators and should be notified at once.

You need to know, however, that the Buddhist texts describe many cases of a meditator realizing enlightenment when dying or in physical pain. If you, as a meditator, have vowed to practice even in the face of death, then you would not really care whether anyone helped you or not. If you suddenly became acutely ill or were facing death, you might be able to practice mindfulness and be conscious until the final breath. We all wish for a good death. Your mind might be exactly primed to realize enlightenment at that very moment. No one knows. If a meditator's death is inevitable or imminent, he might be able to practice equanimity at that time. It all depends on the circumstances and the meditator's wisdom and strength of mind.

Q: Some teachers talk about the "imperfections of insight," while other teachers don't mention them. Do you have any comment about this?

Achan: Depending on the teacher's experience, knowledge, style of teaching, and personal realization, a student may or may not be informed about the imperfections of insight. Sometimes these imperfections masquerade as insight-knowledge. Occasionally a teacher makes a mistake, wrongly believing a student has reached a certain level of realization. Teachers can only instruct to the level of their own realization and understanding.

Mindfulness

Q: What is meant by focusing? Is it the same as mindfulness? What kind of mindfulness do we have in daily life?

Achan: Focusing one's attention is the meaning of mindfulness. There can be no mindfulness without the momentary focusing of consciousness on an object, in the present time, as it appears and then disappears from one's awareness. Mindfulness can be clear or hazy. It doesn't really matter. What does matter is that the meditator *knows* it

as clear or hazy. The mind itself is unstable, arising and vanishing all the time. Mindfulness, as a mental factor of the mind, is likewise unstable. Sometimes it is strong, sometimes weak, and it appears and vanishes.

In ordinary life we usually have a rather light, dispersed type of awareness. We walk casually into a room and sit down. During vipassana practice we gradually develop a more precise kind of attention. It is not a general awareness, as when we are peripherally aware of sitting, for instance, during our normal routine. Precise mindfulness when sitting means to focus our attention on the mind's "feeling" when sitting, not on the physical body itself. By focusing attention in this manner, we know that the mind is mentally touching the object. Beginners may need to get the "feeling" of sitting by temporarily focusing on their hands resting in their laps. The correct object is something quite subtle and may take awhile to discover.

Q: How can mindfulness get stronger?

Achan: Step-by-step (object-by-object) meditation practice strengthens mindfulness. Mindfulness is very scattered and fragile when a beginner first starts to meditate. Its quality at that time is, for example, like the attention we have when glancing at photos of injured people in a magazine. Although we do pay attention, it is not *close attention*, unless we are interested and investigate carefully. But when visiting a friend in the hospital we are more attentive and note more details.

Q: Why is step-by-step practice so important? How long does the meditator have to continue this style of training?

Achan: Slow, step-by-step movements are only necessary in the initial stages of vipassana practice when mindfulness is very dispersed. This method is based on the commentary to the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness* discourse.

Practicing in this way "slows the mind down," so to speak, so we can see more of its activity. The step-by-step method is only a training device; it's a skillful way of using the technique. When mindfulness is stronger we can dispense with slow movements and practice more naturally, still maintaining careful attention.

There are several other reasons for initially practicing the step-by-step method: 1) it makes focusing easier; 2) moment-to-moment mindfulness is maintained on the various meditation objects; and 3) we cultivate continuous practice. The last reason is especially important.

Q: What is the real purpose of staying in the present moment?

Achan: The only reason we stay in the present moment is to develop mindfulness. This presence of mind alerts us to the arising of mental impurities the instant they

appear in consciousness. Our lives are lived out from moment-to-moment. Mental impurities cannot escape our attention if we develop the mind properly.

Q: *What does it mean to use “skillful means” in insight practice?*

Achan: It is essential to learn to use the training in a skillful way. Without skillful means we will not know how to correct our mistakes in meditation practice or how best to live our lives.

In the old days before people had matches, fire was generated by rubbing two sticks together. If one used a slow, continuous movement — without exerting too much pressure — a spark would soon appear. Stopping and starting, on the other hand, would never produce a flame. If the fire were carefully tended, it could have been used for many things. But many factors had to be considered before the fire would have been truly useful to people for cooking and so on. In a similar way, we use the tool of vipassana practice to sharpen and unburden the mind. We become masters of our minds by shaping it to our aims. Once we can do that, the mind becomes truly useful.

Although deep concentration will temporarily suppress mental taints, this is not the way of insight meditation. Since we are working to end frustration and suffering *permanently*, we should let mental impurities appear in the mind as they will so that mindfulness can learn to recognize them clearly.

Without using intelligence in our practice we might meditate for years and get little or no benefit. We need to find ways to make mindfulness practice skillful and beneficial.

Q: *Can you talk about continuous effort and continuous mindfulness?*

Achan: Continuous effort means that effort, concentration and mindfulness are working together in a balanced way. It is essential to develop balance in one’s practice. Effort will be continuous if practice is maintained in an unpressured, step-by-step manner, focusing on one object at a time. Continuous mindfulness means that attention is repeatedly focused on the present moment only.

Q: *Does mindfulness ever mean “memory”?*

Achan: Mindfulness may sometimes be defined as “memory” or “remembering.” But it *never* has this meaning in vipassana meditation. If we remember we are sitting, for example, we are no longer focusing on the present. What we’re aware of is a memory of the past. We are no longer observing an object occurring *this* moment. In vipassana we don’t observe past objects, but only ones that are actually happening now.

Q: Where does the mind keep its attention?

Achan: The mind, in its normal condition, is constantly shifting around, never remaining at the same point for very long. Attention is sometimes kept at the eyes, the ears, etc.

Q: Where, exactly, is the point of contact when seeing, hearing, etc.? Is it at the eyes or ears?

Achan: No. Focusing attention at the eyes or ears, or at any of the physical sense bases, is the way of concentration practice, not vipassana. Experiencing the point where one is actually focusing takes some time. It is quite subtle. A beginning meditator can't understand where that point of contact is right away.

Let's try an experiment. Please close your eyes. You won't be able to see anything. Now open your eyes. Whenever you focus your attention on something, form and a moment of consciousness arise at the same time. In the case of seeing, the form is an image — color. Eventually, you will learn that if you are focusing correctly, you will not cling to either the eye or the image. The mind will stay “in the middle” between the two, so to speak. If you close your eyes, the image and the consciousness that was seeing it fall away simultaneously. The correct thing for mindfulness to focus on is that initial moment of simply receiving the bare sense-datum — the pure sight, sound, etc. — before evaluating or naming it. Right now we are only discussing this, but experiencing it directly is an entirely different matter. I hope you will want to find out what that's like for yourself.

Q: Can you please discuss feeling and mental touching?

Achan: Maintaining mindfulness of feeling is an expression of wisdom. Without the presence of mindfulness, a meditator cannot know feeling (again, in this context, feeling does not mean emotion). This is important to understand. To know feeling in vipassana practice means focusing the attention on the object presently in consciousness, as it appears-and-vanishes. In vipassana, knowing feeling, focusing, and knowing are synonymous.

Ignorance (not-knowing) is present if a meditator practices mindfulness of, for example, the in-and-out abdominal movements, and does not know feeling. The movement is form; the mind should acknowledge this form. If we are aware of the act of mentally touching the movement, then feeling has been established.

Focusing on the feeling of touching as it arises and vanishes, in the present moment, is correct practice. If this is done the student is fulfilling his duty as a meditator.

Q: Since the mind is so fast, it seems that the name or meaning of an object arises with the knowing of it. Why does this happen?

Achan: Classifying an object happens through memory and habitual association. Only strong mindfulness can separate acts of seeing, hearing and so forth from their names and ordinary meanings. Non-meditators who only *think* about separating the meaning from an object will find it almost impossible to just focus on bare sense data. If they practice insight meditation, however, they will experience this for themselves.

Q: We are constantly naming objects in daily life. How can we apply bare attention to sensory impressions in ordinary situations?

Achan: Naming objects is correct according to worldly convention. It is indispensable. Normal life could not function if we didn't name things. Without names we couldn't speak of human beings, plants, animals, or anything else. We could only observe pure forms. Compassion and ethical behavior would have no meaning, resulting in a very dangerous situation.

Learning the truth behind the apparent sensory world means realizing that hearing is simply knowing sound, seeing is only knowing color, and so forth. With this knowledge we will not be misled by phenomena and their names, mistaking labels for ultimate truth.

Knowing phenomena as they really are cannot cause stress, frustration or pain. Truly knowing what is what results in a non-attached attitude, which means that worldly phenomena can no longer tyrannize us. We can still function and carry out our responsibilities, but without giving ignorance a chance to confuse us.

Q: What is the relationship between seeing, hearing and the other acts of perception, and unhealthy mental states?

Achan: Except for the Buddhas and the arahants, unhealthy mental states will occasionally arise when there is sense-perception. We will feel attraction and aversion, which automatically arise in an unguarded mind. But if the sense-doors are guarded by mindfulness, mental impurities cannot be born. This watchfulness can be developed through meditation practice. It serves as a buffer, side-stepping confusion, entanglements and pain. Without this knowledge our mind constantly swings between the two poles of attraction and aversion.

Q: Can mindfulness be stronger than the mental defilements?

Achan: Yes, certainly. The mind itself is luminous and clear, but the mental impurities greed, hatred and delusion cloud it, hiding its true nature. Only through personal experience can a meditator see that mindfulness, when it is strong enough, can render the deluded mind clear. That is the full development of mindfulness that happens naturally when we practice correctly.

The mind is the most important factor in the world. The physical body is also important and must be given proper care, but it is the mind that actually rules the world.

The mind in its ordinary state is dominated by impurities. Beautiful and skillful states of consciousness certainly arise from time to time, but the fire of negative impulses may flare up at any moment when the mind has not been properly tamed. Notice how most of us are easily hurt by some trifle, and how quick we are to harbor resentment. It is easy to see that much of the time mental confusion is in control. The deluded mind is swept along, taking the line of least resistance. Defilements have the characteristic of attaching and clinging to the mind. However, even these negative impulses arise and vanish. Fortunately, we cannot be totally angry or lustful twenty-four hours a day!

When we begin to practice insight meditation, these negativities seem to magnify. A struggle begins, but we should not try to fight these mental impurities directly. Instead we should gradually “starve them out” by merely observing or taking note of their appearance and disappearance. Their power will weaken until eventually we can conquer them.

The Buddha said the mind had the greatest potential for being trained and tamed. His efforts were completely victorious. We, too, can make our best effort and realize success. Actually, our mental impurities are the best teachers, showing us everything we need to know about ourselves. The truth is right in front of our eyes.

Q: So much of the time my mind seems to revolve around unwholesome thoughts. When I practice insight meditation, I sometimes think these negative thoughts will never be conquered. How can I practice, feeling the way I do now?

Achan: When a person first begins to meditate the mind is chaotic or just dull. There’s a good deal of confusion, but you shouldn’t abandon the effort so quickly. Actually, you have many good objects to work with now, and they are all good fuel for your practice.

Don't try to escape this situation. See these mental states as temporary messengers bringing you much-needed information about yourself. We will never learn to live freely and comfortably in the world if we always want to escape unpleasant circumstances. Not even the Buddha could escape worldly blame, but his mind was not thrown off-balance by it. He knew that praise and blame always alternate in the conventional world. We can try to follow his example.

So let those thoughts arise and simply *observe* them with clear attention. Trying to suppress or get rid of them will only make them sink to the bottom of your mind, like sediment sinking to the bottom of a jar of muddy water. If you don't shake the jar, the water seems clear, yet the sediment is still there. By pouring clear water into the jar, however, the mud will eventually be washed away and all the water will become clear, even at the bottom of the jar. In insight meditation, unskillful mental states are brought to the surface of consciousness where mindfulness melts them away one by one.

During the initial stages of meditation practice, students are usually very surprised at and uncomfortable about seeing the powerful negative states that arise in their minds. This is all quite natural. We all have the same experience. But with continued practice this situation resolves itself.

Q: When focusing on objects, is there a difference between physical seeing and knowing?

Achan: Yes. If a meditator can experience the difference, then practice becomes easier. But it is quite subtle. As an illustration, seeing means that now you see me as we are speaking, but you also know me without seeing me. When I physically leave your presence, you still know (about) me, although you don't actually see me.

In vipassana practice, seeing means that mindfulness is completely focused on the object in the present moment, as it appears-and-vanishes in consciousness. Seeing and focusing in the present means that mindfulness is functioning. If you only know about an object, but it is not in focus right now, then you are experiencing concentration.

A meditator whose momentary concentration is balanced with mindfulness can focus on objects as they arise and vanish from his awareness. Sense-impressions are born and then die, again and again. If a meditator does not have balanced concentration and mindfulness, he will only have a vague awareness that "something is happening." He just stays with concentration, perhaps for a long time, instead of focusing his mindfulness on the present moment. Perhaps some of you have experienced this.

Q: Does mindfulness ever feel relaxed and natural? Sometimes it seems like a burden to sustain it during practice.

Achan: Learning any new skill can be awkward and a bit burdensome at first. But after awhile, as you gain more experience, what was tiring and effortful becomes effortless. Suddenly, its heavy quality breaks. Mindfulness is then able to acknowledge objects in a more natural way. It becomes smooth-running, and this quality is excellent for focusing. This easy-flowing mindfulness develops during periods of intensive, all-day practice. But it's easy to attach to this type of mindfulness, so the meditator has to be careful of that.

Q: Can you speak more about clinging to mindfulness?

Achan: After two or three weeks of continuous step-by-step practice mindfulness becomes a habit, and it is sharp and clear. This is a good feeling, and the meditator may want to continue practicing with this type of clear awareness all the time. After a few weeks of meditating intensively, I ask the student to practice more naturally as in everyday life, but still maintain clarity when focusing on objects. After all, this training in mental development is not the goal, but just a tool to purify the deluded mind.

Q: Are we to focus on gestures, such as automatically moving or touching a part of the body?

Achan: Focusing on these gestures is an important part of formal meditation practice in the beginning and intermediate stages. But during the activities of daily life, there is actually no reason to be mindful of phenomena that cause no defilements to arise. When vipassana practice is mature, one focuses mainly on the arising of mental impurities or extreme mental states. Attachment and other unwholesome states of mind generally do not arise when performing automatic actions.

Q: When I go on a long, intensive meditation retreat, I find that my mindfulness when sitting and walking is always clearer compared to other activities. Why is this?

Achan: Sitting and walking, which are the main postures we observe in this style of practice, are good exercises for balancing concentration and mindfulness. But remember, all objects are of equal value in insight meditation.

Too much attention paid to maintaining sharp mindfulness is not good. When you perform a simple action during intensive practice mindfulness can also be quite clear, even though your concentration is lower. You could call it accidental or spontaneous mindfulness and you might find it clearer than the mindfulness that happens when you're sitting and walking.

Why is mindfulness of the sitting posture emphasized so much in vipassana practice?

Sitting is a very stable posture in which we quickly develop concentration. It is the traditional posture for samadhi meditators. As far as vipassana practice is concerned, sitting meditation is a good foundation-exercise for beginners. It establishes momentary concentration, which is as much concentration as we need for insight meditation. When observing sitting we can see any emotions that may arise such as anger, restlessness and boredom (of course, we can see these with the other postures also). Most important, the posture reveals the inherent discomfort in the body.

In everyday life we are constantly adjusting our posture, which hides the discomfort that is always present. But when sitting still in meditation, bodily pain eventually arises and we see it more clearly because we're focused on it. Discomfort eventually arises no matter what posture we're in — even when lying down. In ordinary life we are only vaguely aware of our constant desire for comfort and don't pay attention to the fact that a change of posture gives only temporary relief. An enlightened being, too, changes posture when physical pain arises, but he does so without any delusion or aversion in his mind.

Some meditators are able to sit like Buddha statues for a long time, but without understanding the principles of vipassana practice. A statue is only matter. It doesn't have any feeling. It doesn't know itself — or anything else. So don't sit like a statue.

*Q: As mindfulness progresses, you ask the meditator to practice mental touching at different points on the body. Why is this necessary?*²⁰

Achan: Increasing the number of touching-points develops stronger concentration, which balances with increasing mindfulness. Each successive touch-point has to be as clear as the previous one. Each point is known only for a moment, and then the meditator moves on to the next one.

Mindfulness by nature shifts all the time, focusing on different phenomena as they appear in the present moment. If our attention is focused on only one object for a long time, it will not be able to work with concentration as a balancing factor. It will have its own separate power. That is why I do not want most vipassana meditators to do extended sitting, especially if they have a background in samadhi practice. Such practitioners often have too much concentration for vipassana meditation, which has to

²⁰ This refers to a meditation exercise called "sitting-touching," in which a meditator first notes the sitting posture and then places his attention on different spots on the body, such as the point where his buttocks touch the floor, his knee, and so on, in a particular order. His attention rests on each touch-point for only one moment. After noting the last touch-point, he begins the sequence again.

be lowered. In vipassana practice the mind has to keep moving, mindfully noting the flux of phenomena as they come into consciousness. The meditator's mind has to follow the flow of objects as they strike the mind, from moment to moment, *right on the mark*. This is very important to understand.

Q: Can you please elaborate on step-by-step mindfulness and the more natural type of mindfulness practice? I'd like to know the background of both types of practice.

Achan: During the Buddha's time many people had keen abilities, so they were able to gain insight very quickly. Devoting one's whole life, or a major part of one's time, to meditation was considered a very worthy activity. Some people with strong abilities do exist today, and a few of them can practice by a more natural method, chipping away at the mental impurities every day, and realizing the same truths as those who undertake more structured training in a meditation retreat.

But from my own observation as a teacher for more than four decades, people who can gain profound insight quickly are very rare. Most people today have only moderate abilities, which is why I prefer to teach the step-by-step method.

There are a number of different vipassana techniques. A very few individuals can be successful with a meditation object from the *vipassana bhumis*. The bhumis are a list of meditation objects that serve as working-grounds for the establishing of insight.²¹ Then again, some students can benefit from the method of mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati) for developing both concentration and insight.²²

Whether a student practices a natural or a structured method is not the point. All methods are valid if they help extinguish mental defilements. That is the criteria for any method. And we should realize that all techniques have to be dropped eventually.

Q: There are so many different ways of practicing insight meditation. When would a meditator be justified in switching from one method to another?

Achan: Some people are attracted to a particular practice style because it is compatible with their background, temperament, or capabilities.

Any meditation technique is simply a form of skillful means. From my viewpoint, if a meditator keeps switching methods it usually indicates that little progress has been made in his practice. It is not by trying many different methods that we will

²¹ See Glossary for a complete list of the vipassana bhumis.

²² There are several different anapanasati techniques. For developing insight along with concentration, the suitable method is observing the contact of air at the nostrils as one breathes in and out. Counting the breaths, and other anapanasati methods, develop concentration only.

extinguish mental impurities. [One teacher describes this as digging many shallow wells, never going deep enough in one spot to hit water. — Ed.] Understanding the underlying principles of vipassana practice will eventually guide the student to a certain point, after which no desire to change the method will arise. All correct vipassana methods eventually converge.

Although no single vipassana technique is superior to any other, when a meditator finds a method he wants to follow he should investigate to make sure it is a *genuine* insight practice and not a concentration technique. It can be confusing because a number of methods that call themselves “vipassana” are actually concentration practices.

Q: Should we perform work activities during an intensive meditation retreat?

Achan: It depends on the style of training being offered by the meditation center. If the training is non-intensive, then incorporating work into the day’s schedule is a useful tool. There are also practical considerations. In Asia, meditation centers have the support of many laypeople who are willing to assist meditators in every way. But here in the west that kind of assistance is rarely available, so we have to adjust to the circumstances.

In my way of teaching, I only allow advanced meditators to do simple work. I feel the beginner should train in a step-by-step manner, with the intent of developing precise mindfulness and a balanced practice. One principle of this concentrated style of vipassana is that a new meditator shouldn’t perform any activity that will lower or confuse his mindfulness. If possible, I prefer to make arrangements with others for daily care so that a beginner performs no extra work at all.

A new meditator, following the step-by-step method, cannot acknowledge the objects appearing to his awareness on a momentary basis when doing anything other than the simplest of tasks. The flux of the mind is unbelievably rapid. The beginner gets easily confused when trying to do complicated actions, and it seems that two or more objects are flashing into the mind simultaneously. In fact, that is an impossibility. In truth, phenomena are perceived one by one in rapid succession, from one moment to the next.

Q: Isn’t general mindfulness enough for the early stages of vipassana training?

Achan: If a meditator gives up step-by-step awareness in the early stages of training, he will only have general mindfulness mixed with delusion. It is similar to our everyday mind. Of course, it is better to have general mindfulness than to give up practicing altogether. With general mindfulness we simply know what is being done, but without great precision.

When a lamp is turned on in a sunny room, its light will be diffused by the much brighter sunlight. But when the same lamp is turned on in a dark room, its light seems very bright, and it sharply outlines whatever it falls on. The mindfulness of a beginner who drops the step-by-step method is like the former light — diffused and fuzzy. Mindfulness will be scattered. Although our practice will lose some continuity, if we need to perform a complicated task we should use general mindfulness and then resume step-by-step practice as soon as possible.

Q: Could you please talk about boredom in practice? Work seems to relieve boredom.

Achan: The meditator's job is to know the mind in every condition. Being thoroughly bored is an important learning experience, and much can be said about this mental state. In fact, another reason I don't recommend work during an intensive meditation retreat is because all of us have to face the boredom, discontent, frustration and other unpleasant mental states that inevitably arise during practice.

I feel that taking attention away from the main activity of developing balanced mindfulness delays a student's progress. Since most people have only limited time for attending intensive meditation retreats, all their energy should flow in one direction. The student still has the duty to work but, to my mind, that duty is completely fulfilled solely by developing mindfulness, concentration, and other wholesome qualities. Cleansing the mind of mental impurities is the hardest work of all!

Q: Sometimes I have clear awareness of unsatisfactoriness. At other times, impermanence and nonself are clearer. Why the change?

Achan: Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonselfness are aspects of the same reality. Impermanence and nonselfness are both true, but they are derived from unsatisfactoriness. These three aspects are collectively known as the three characteristics of existence. Which characteristic is clearest to a meditator reveals something about his temperament and background.

Q: How can we separate desire from unsatisfactoriness?

Achan: Only a person close to entering one of the "supramundane paths" — that is, close to attaining a level of enlightenment — can separate these two things. We need strong mindfulness to separate suffering from craving. In insight meditation we investigate not only the ordinary frustration and pain of daily living but, more importantly, the latent and deeply-entrenched craving that all beings have. Unwholesome, distorted mental attitudes ultimately come

from craving. The important point is to keep on with our practice no matter what.

The Dhamma

Q: Why does Buddhism place so much emphasis on the unsatisfactoriness of life? Life does have its happy moments.

Achan: The Buddha's analysis concluded that life is imperfect. The Buddha never denied that happiness exists. All mental states, however, are subject to change — they are impermanent. Worldly conditions can never give us *complete* happiness. Suffering happens all by itself; we don't have to look for it.

The five things we cling to, called the “five khandhas,” are: 1) material form, 2) feeling, 3) perception, 4) mental formations, and 5) consciousness. All of these are constantly changing, and we will *always* get pulled off-balance whenever we cling to any of these changing phenomena.

The truth of suffering — the First Noble Truth — and the way to free ourselves from it, are the focal points of the Buddhist teachings. Of the three jewels of Buddhism — the Buddha, Dhamma and sangha — the Dhamma is the crown jewel. The Dhamma, which means the truth that the Buddha discovered, and also the Buddhist teachings themselves, is elevated above the Buddha and the sangha. The sangha, remember, is the group of Buddhist monks and nuns. It was through following the Dhamma and penetrating the truth of suffering that the Buddha and the enlightened ones gained liberation. The Dhamma protects us and offers permanent freedom from distress.

Q: How can we find the place where suffering ends?

Achan: The place where suffering arises is exactly the same place where it ends and can be extinguished.

We really have to want complete freedom — not just a partial realization — if we are to make an end of suffering. We begin to seriously practice the Dhamma when life teaches us its lessons. It might take a long time or a short time.

Q: Is the end of suffering the goal of every Buddhist tradition?

Achan: The goal of true Buddhist practice is the end of unhealthy mental attitudes such as attachment, and the development of wisdom and compassion. If a person's reason for practicing the Buddhist teachings is based on the right understanding that Nibbana totally ends mental distress, he will want to continue practicing until the end of suffering is realized.

Q: How can worldly reality be defined?

Achan: Although language has its limitations, we can use conventional phrases and say that worldly phenomena have the characteristics of arising and disappearing. This is a truth of the world that we can experience directly.

Neither the past nor the future is real. The past is only a memory; the future is a product of the imagination. The present moment is real, but fleeting. In fact it has no substance. It is empty.

Q: I don't quite understand why the past and future are not true or real. And what is the meaning of "empty" in this context?

Achan: What is real right now? Only the events of the present moment. Past events were real and true when they were happening, but they are *no longer* real. They are not real now, since they are not happening any more. At this time they don't exist. The future will be true when it happens, but it isn't so now, because it isn't happening yet. In insight meditation we are concerned only with the now-moment, the present-moment reality.

If a person is sitting in a chair and then stands up and begins walking around the room, where does the sitting posture go? Is it still there? Is there a form still sitting in the chair? No. The sitting has ceased and disappeared. It is no longer true to say that someone is sitting there when the person is now walking around. The event of sitting has ceased to exist. An event that happened in the past — even just a few seconds previously — is already gone. A form that happened in the past is only a memory. Real events actively arise and vanish in the present, but memories do not.

When we experience an unpleasant mental state, such as anger, which is triggered by a memory, the suffering is happening in the *present*, right now. We cannot suffer in the past. If we worry about the future, we have a disturbed mind in the *present*. Everything that happens, happens in the present. So all we need to do is take care of the present moment and we won't suffer.

Since all real phenomena in the world arise and disappear in a moment, they lack an enduring, permanent core. In that sense they are empty.

Q: Can we realize enlightenment even if we've never heard of the Four Noble Truths?

Achan: Yes, if someone intuitively has what is called "right view"²³ and practices insight meditation correctly. Enlightenment can be called by many

²³ Right view refers to an understanding of the Four Noble Truths. In this instance it means an innate understanding, without having read or heard about the subject before. However, it is said that only a Buddha is

names. Even in Buddhism, the expression of the enlightenment experience varies with the tradition, language, and culture. It does not matter if we call ourselves Buddhists or not. What matters is whether or not we know how unsatisfactoriness is born and how it ceases. Can we separate the mind from the conditions of suffering? These are the essential concerns. Any others are secondary.

The nature of the Four Noble Truths does not change through time. In that sense these truths are like fire. The nature of fire is always to give heat. That was true of fire in the past, it is true of fire in the present, and it will be true of fire in the future, although the form of the heat may change. Likewise, the Four Noble Truths that exist in our world always have the same characteristics. They are available for all to explore. These Truths burn away mental defilements.

Q: Can you comment on the Four Noble Truths and their relationship to vipassana training?

Achan: The Four Noble Truths may be explained in different ways. The Buddha's Enlightenment showed that he penetrated the nature of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), as well as solving the problem of it. All the Buddhas and arahants have to arrive at the same realization.

The First Noble Truth, of the unsatisfactoriness inherent in worldly existence, means there is always the *potential for suffering*. We can never be in absolute control of any situation. It is impossible to control the flux of phenomena.

The Second Truth says we have a special kind of deep-rooted desire or craving, which is the condition that makes unhappiness arise again and again.

The Third Noble Truth says that suffering will end when craving ceases. In the sutra called "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion," we read: "Cessation of suffering, as a Noble Truth, is this: It is remainderless fading and ceasing, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of that same craving."²⁴ Total freedom from suffering can be attained by *anyone* willing to develop his mind to the point of letting go of craving.

The Fourth Truth describes the path that leads to complete freedom from suffering, called the Noble Eightfold Path.

able to understand the Four Noble Truths from his own inner wisdom, without learning about them from others. Right view can also mean an understanding of the universal law of karma, cause-and-effect.

²⁴ *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, SN 56.11.

The First and Second Truths describe our lives as they are now. If we practice vipassana and gain knowledge of things as they actually are, we'll be able to realize the Third and Fourth Noble Truths.

Q: I've read about some monks, nuns and lay people realizing enlightenment spontaneously. Isn't it possible for people today to suddenly realize spiritual liberation without much effort? Is spiritual cultivation more difficult in modern times?

Achan: It's possible today for some people to spontaneously realize at least some degree of enlightenment, but I believe it is quite rare. These people have had deeply significant spiritual experiences, seemingly without preparation. Many Buddhists, especially in Asia, believe the "seeds" for such experiences were sown in previous lifetimes.

In the days of the Buddha, spiritual cultivation was accepted and encouraged. There were extraordinary teachers then, as well as outstanding students. It is difficult to find these conditions today. Our sense of values differs now. There are still a few people willing to commit themselves completely to the Dhamma, but most of us have mixed priorities.

Q: Should we try to discover the origin of ignorance or the emotions?

Achan: No. Ignorance appears because of ripening conditions. We do not need to know where emotions originate, or why thoughts appear and disappear. Actually, we can *never* discover their origin no matter how much we try or wish to know it. That is my understanding.

The vipassana method does not involve analyzing objects at all. We just practice to abandon the inner taints which appear in the mind right *now*. The kind of searching you're talking about is inappropriate during vipassana practice and only lowers your mindfulness. It removes you from the present moment and leads you into conjecture and fantasy.

Q: What is the deepest layer of mental obstructions?

Achan: There are latent, habitual tendencies in the mind that remain dormant and appear when conditions are ripe for awakening. These are not ordinary delusions about worldly life, but spiritual ignorance in the sense of not penetrating the meaning of the Four Noble Truths. Mindfulness practice helps us abandon these mental taints.

During intensive meditation, these hidden pollutants can arise with both wholesome and unwholesome states of mind. Concentration meditation suppresses ordinary desire, hatred and delusion. When these hindrances are suppressed, dormant

qualities such as deep conceit may arise for the meditator who practices tranquility to a high level. The student may mistakenly believe he has realized final enlightenment. This experience may also be accompanied by psychic powers. Self-delusion is born and it is quite a dangerous situation. In this case, deep latent defilements have arisen together with concentration, and are deluding the meditator. Unfortunately, some teachers and students have the same delusion. This confusion and misunderstanding can easily trap a meditator.

Ordinary ignorance regarding worldly life is easier to correct than spiritual delusion. It is difficult to correct spiritual wrong view because a person tenaciously clings to his spiritual ideas and opinions. Sometimes a meditator can give up that kind of persistent error and conceit, but usually it is difficult to help anyone who has these deeply-entrenched wrong views.

Q How can we abandon very deep mental impurities?

Achan: These deep-rooted obstructions are the way of life for ordinary, unenlightened people. The mind and these mental taints feed on each other. The mind originates from them and they are born in the mind again and again, arising-and-vanishing in consciousness all the time. Fortunately, there is a way of eradicating these latent impurities.

The mind is like a muddy stream we want to purify. The loose sediment is like our ordinary desires and attachments. Now imagine there is a heavy mud deposit that has solidified on the bottom of the stream. This is like a very deep mental defilement. We need to cut off the source of the looser sediment, as well as remove the hard mud. A dam can be placed at a strategic point to halt the accumulation of all kinds of sediment. In time, both the loose and the hard sediment will be eliminated.

In a similar way, we can stop both ordinary attachments and the deepest defilements from appearing in the mind. The mental barrier or filter is *mindfulness*. Our minds can be clear, free from conflict and frustration, when certain conditions have stopped. What conditions? Those that make unhealthy impulses arise. The path of practice has been fulfilled when ordinary and latent obstructions have completely stopped. Though the world around us remains the same, with its activity playing out from moment to moment, we don't have to be trapped in the mud of mental turmoil and delusion.

Q: Are there different types of wisdom in Buddhism?

Achan: We gain worldly wisdom or knowledge by listening, studying, and thinking. In the Buddhist teachings all such knowledge, even meditative realization, is considered mundane until enlightenment is realized.

All direct knowledge of mind-and-body processes helps us on the path to Nibbana, but that knowledge is still in the realm of conventional experience. Our senses provide the worldly tools for our practice. Meditators who clearly experience impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, or nonselfness are helped by this breakthrough, but this is still information acquired from the world of the senses. It is a kind of knowledge known by mindfulness, which itself is a worldly phenomenon.

The direct experience of Nibbana is the only wisdom that is truly supramundane — beyond the world.

Q: What is the relationship between worldly phenomena, mindfulness and wisdom?

Achan: Worldly phenomena demonstrate themselves only in the present moment. A meditator focuses on the objects appearing in the present moment. When the mundane knowledge of unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, or nonselfness is powerful and dominates the mind, it manifests as the wisdom faculty. This faculty arises-and-vanishes like all other mundane things. Nevertheless, if you experience the wisdom faculty you will not be misled in your practice.

Without practicing mindfulness, people are unable to know that conventional knowledge and worldly phenomena are subject to flux. If you can practice to the point where mindfulness can see the instability of mundane knowledge, then Nibbana is not very far away.

Q: Can you please discuss enlightenment?

Achan: Enlightenment does not depend on sensory impressions, which are only vehicles of the practice. Enlightenment is not dependent on the world of ordinary mentality-and-materiality.

During the experience of enlightenment, insight-wisdom transcends the conceptual knowledge of unsatisfactoriness, impermanence and nonselfness. At that point there are no phenomenal objects for the mind to focus on. The wisdom of enlightenment is clear by itself and is unmistakable. There can be no doubt. It is directly experienced.

Q: Can Nibbana be described at all?

Achan: We can only describe Nibbana in worldly terms. Nibbana is unconditioned and unborn. There is no suffering in it. It is not related to any worldly circumstance.

Nibbana is not the result of cause-and-effect. If Nibbana were subject to cause-and-effect, the chain of dependent origination²⁵ by which suffering appears would function and would result in ignorance.

Nibbana is not a state. It has no structure on which to erect any condition related to physicality and mentality. No arising-and-disappearing occurs in Nibbana.

Nibbana has no attachments of any kind. It has no form of clinging which would give rise to unsatisfactoriness. Nibbana is outside of time and space. If Nibbana had a space-time relationship, it would then have a past and a future and be subject to worldly flux.

Nibbana has no coming or going. It has no movement. It is free from the fluctuation and restless nature of our world. The early Pali Buddhist texts describe Nibbana like this: “Here the elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and motion have no place; the notions of length and breadth, the subtle and the gross, good and evil, name and form, are altogether destroyed. Neither this world nor the other; nor coming, going, or standing; neither death nor birth, nor sense objects, are to be found.”

Nibbana has been described as the cool cave, the refuge, and ultimate peace. I hope all of you can realize this liberating wisdom.

Q: Can we catch a glimpse of Nibbana?

Achan: Yes, it is possible. It appears as a flash, like lightning, in the mind of a person who momentarily wakes up from spiritual ignorance, and then it disappears. Though it is gone, the glimpse remains. You have actually seen it. You definitely know it is there.

Karma

Q: Can you please discuss karma during vipassana practice and karma in everyday life?

Achan: During vipassana practice the meditator who establishes mindfulness makes only wholesome karma, regardless of the content of his thoughts or so-called good or bad states of mind. For example, if we think of stealing something but are mindful of

²⁵ See Glossary.

the thought, no bad karma is made. Correct mindfulness always produces wholesome karma.

As we said earlier, karma means intentional action. Of course, it is easy to perform unwholesome karma in daily life. It is like rolling a wheel down a mountain. Performing skillful karma is like rolling a wheel *up* a mountain.

Karma is a vast and complex subject. The average person does not understand the complexity of karma and its results, which, again, are called *vipaka*. Without understanding cause and effect we continue to make unskillful karma much of the time.

Karma has to do with intention. It is volition that controls the mind. Volition has the power to order the body to make karmas — perform actions — of various sorts.

Human beings and animals are born as the result of karma from previous lifetimes. And during the course of their lives they also have to experience the results of past karma, past intentional action. Most people do not understand that a person does not necessarily receive the effects of unwholesome or wholesome karma immediately, or even during the same lifetime.

Also, when a particular result, or *vipaka*, is experienced, we make new karma depending on how we react to it. Whether we make skillful or unskillful karma depends on our clarity of mind. If mindfulness is present we don't have to experience anguish, even though the body might be sick. The unpleasant bodily feeling is a result, a *vipaka*, caused by a previous action. We can't know what action caused it, or when — it may have occurred several lifetimes ago.

But it doesn't matter what past action caused the unpleasant result we may be experiencing now. The important thing is how we react to it in the present.

Both desire and aversion are unskillful karma. If we don't have aversion for an unpleasant feeling in the body, or another unpleasant sense-impression, but instead just observe it with equanimity, we will not generate any unwholesome karma. We will not create the cause for more suffering in the future. The same with a pleasant feeling or sense-impression — if we don't cling to it with desire, we will not create a cause for future unhappiness.

Karma-result or *vipaka* manifests as the five aggregates of clinging I mentioned before: the body, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. In order to “spend” or extinguish the results of past karma we should mindfully observe these aggregates without disliking them when they're unpleasant or liking them when they're pleasant.

Q: How can we perform wholesome karma?

Achan: It is excellent when we can perform wholesome deeds without a desire for reward. Usually most of our deeds are mixed and contain some element of self-interest. Still, we can try to make wholesome karma. It is like placing salt and sugar in a glass of water. If the sweet taste is more pronounced than the salty, we say, “the water is sweet,” even though the salt is still there, diluted in the water.

Karma and its result is the stuff which constitutes our lives. We always have a chance to make more wholesome karma since consciousness comes into being and falls away immediately, which means we always have a fresh moment of consciousness to work with. Every new consciousness is “open” — it can be either wholesome or unwholesome. It doesn’t matter how many unwholesome mind-moments we had in the past. Whenever a wholesome state of consciousness appears, the mental defilements are weakened. Even though a wholesome mind-moment arises-and-disappears immediately, its beneficial results can be intensified if it is repeated often. Although habitual behavior tends to emanate from strong karmas repeated often in the past, we can always choose how to respond at any given moment.

Q: Do the Buddhas and other fully enlightened beings make karma?

Achan: They make only what is called “inoperative karma.” This is karma that does not produce any result, like a seed that’s no longer viable. Although they do not make any new karma, they still receive the results of past karmic action as long as they are alive.

As I mentioned earlier, some arahants cannot completely control habits which arise from past karma. A certain habit can be controlled only when mindfulness is stronger than the habit. Sometimes an arahant can control certain habits temporarily and may have a choice about spending the results of past karma or not. Even when the habit cannot be controlled, the action has no unskillful content at all. There is no delusion in the mind. The habit simply appears as a phenomenon in the world. Whenever an arahant performs an action, his mind is always clear and free from delusion.

Q: How can we escape the results of karmically heavy deeds?

Achan: It depends on what is meant by escaping. The karmic results of a volitional action can be quite complicated and difficult to see. Mindfulness, however, can change one’s entire attitude in any situation.

Regarding heavy karma, suppose a thief robs and kills someone. The criminal is caught and the case goes to trial. The jury gives him a life sentence for the felony of murder. The man has also stolen some property, but the theft did not produce the heavier sentence. He has to serve the heavier sentence for taking a life.

Another example is contained in the story of the Buddha's disciple Angulimala, who murdered 999 people before meeting the Buddha. Some time after being converted to the Buddhist teachings, Angulimala became an arahant. However, he could not escape the results of his past actions and was beaten by an angry mob. But since he was already an enlightened arahant with no hatred in his mind he accepted this result, which did not cause him any mental suffering or disturb his peace of mind.

*Q: Is it our karmic tendencies that make us choose to follow either the arahant or the Bodhisattva path?*²⁶

Achan: Our past actions play an important role, as well as the life we are shaping now. Much has been said about both paths, mostly emphasizing their differences. Yet they are not so very different in actual practice. In fact, they are complementary in many areas.

Cultivation of samadhi power is very important for the Bodhisattva way. It gives the practitioner the necessary power to overcome great obstacles when assisting others. A high degree of wisdom is needed to skillfully aid others without the interference of self-interest. The Bodhisattva must also diligently cultivate his or her own meditation practice to dissolve egotism.

The arahant path seeks to first eliminate one's own personal suffering. After that, according to his abilities and temperament, the arahant can then assist others. To have a selfish, callous attitude to the suffering inherent in sentient existence is not possible for a person who genuinely develops the spiritual path. For a long time devotees of both paths will be close companions on the road to liberation.

Teachers, Centers and Methods

Q: How important is it to practice under the guidance of a meditation teacher?

Achan: The Dhamma is our peerless guide for all time and in all situations. The meditation teacher serves as our good friend and advisor.

²⁶ Broadly speaking, there are two ways of practicing the Buddhist teachings. The first, the path of the arahant, is to develop one's mind until enlightenment is attained and one is free of suffering and the round of rebirth. The second approach is to help others attain enlightenment before attaining it oneself. This is called the Bodhisattva path. Those who wish to be Buddhas in the future follow this path, which takes much longer than the arahant path.

Although there are a few people who have quick comprehension of the Dhamma and the method of insight meditation, the majority of meditators need the counsel and direction of a teacher. It is very easy to stray off the vipassana path. Wrongly-based practice can harm the meditator or fail to yield beneficial results even after years of practice.

Q: How can we choose a reliable meditation teacher?

Achan: We can only learn from personal experience. The Buddha offered a guideline for choosing a capable teacher. Teachers have various levels of spiritual development, of course, and teaching styles can be very different. Observing the other students of a particular teacher may be helpful, but not infallible. Both the student and the teacher have to observe each other over a long period of time, under varying circumstances, using intelligence and compassion.

We need to know if the teacher is truly interested in the student's welfare and cultivation of the practice, or if there is another reason the relationship is developing. A teacher should be accessible for instruction and guidance. Temperaments vary considerably, and the face of compassion is not always mild. The stern measures some teachers use will be proper training tools for their students' lack of discipline. In contrast, some students need gentle treatment. An instructor needs to assess the student's earnestness and willingness to undertake the necessary self-regulation required for insight meditation practice.

The good friend in Dhamma wants the student's practice to mature and feels truly blessed if the meditator's realization surpasses his own.

It is important for both the teacher and student to know when the time has come to let go of each other. At an appropriate time the student should be free to study with other teachers.

Q: How closely does a teacher have to work with a meditator in vipassana training?

Achan: Close supervision is needed for some students, especially those who exhibit certain emotional problems. These students may benefit from psychological counseling before beginning meditation training. Or they may be helped by making what is called "merit" — performing wholesome activities in order to make good karma — prior to starting vipassana practice. This could include such things as helping others, chanting Buddhist suttas, abiding by the five moral precepts, and so forth.

Other students can grow in their own practice without too much intervention from the teacher. In this way meditators may sometimes penetrate the depths of

the teachings by their own means, breaking open the experience of insight by themselves.

Some teachers prefer that a meditator remain under their guidance until a certain level of realization has been attained. Usually a teacher will train the student to the point of understanding the practice well, knowing how to overcome certain obstacles, and being able to correct common problems encountered in the practice. In a mutually respectful relationship, it is hoped that the teacher and student will remain spiritual friends for a long time.

Q: Can progress in the training occur only when a student-teacher relationship has been established? Does the student have to make a pledge to a teacher?

Achan: No. Progress in insight meditation does not depend on any rite, ritual, pledge or vow to a teacher. In fact, the idea of pledges and vows to teachers is quite foreign to the early Buddhist teachings. Teachers and students should be on their guard against over-dependency or being controlled by a group.

No teacher can bestow enlightenment on anyone. Even the Buddha himself couldn't do that. The Buddhist teachings do not advocate blind belief. The Buddha made that very clear in his last sermon.

Q: Is there any special relationship established between student and teacher during a period of intensive practice?

Achan: Yes. In the west there is little emphasis on this aspect of vipassana instruction. But in Southeast Asia, commencing meditation training is considered a pivotal experience for a Buddhist, or even a non-Buddhist. It is often celebrated by a simple observance, but there are no vows made to the teacher. It is not necessary to participate in such an observance, but through the centuries it has had beneficial results for meditators.

A ceremony establishes a mutual commitment between student and teacher for the training period, which helps strengthen the meditator's resolve to continue practicing. The teacher may remind the meditator of the Buddha's invincible courage, because the student will need fortitude when problems arise. The meditator will know he is not alone during this time, but is under the guidance of the Dhamma, the training, and the teacher. Non-Buddhists can also acquire good results from this relationship. This preparation also allows the student and teacher to arrive at a mutual agreement when the instructor has to correct the

student. In this manner communication links are established and training begins on a sound basis of mutual trust and goodwill.

Q: How important is an interview with the teacher during intensive meditation practice?

Achan: It very much depends on the teacher's style. Some teachers are of the "stew-in-your-own juice" school, tossing every situation back to the meditator to sort out. This is appropriate for some students.

But in my way of teaching, frequent instruction and feedback are essential for monitoring the student's progress early on. When a meditator knows how to practice correctly, an interview with the teacher is less important. Also, students should realize that self-correction in practice is possible. Until enlightenment, though, there will always be some element of "wrong" practice.

But insight-wisdom cannot be realized purely as a result of being interviewed by a teacher. It occurs spontaneously, and depends on the meditator's background and mental development.

Q: I often find myself preparing for an interview, thinking of things to say. What can I do about this situation?

Achan: It lowers mindfulness, of course, unless one focuses on "thinking." The meditator has left the present moment and is living in the future. Meditators often tell me what occurred in their imagination, or relate something previously read or heard, or the content of a dream.

During an interview, I am mainly interested in learning if focusing has been established in the correct way. I want to know what objects the new meditator is using, how mindfulness is being maintained, and if there is moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness, one object at a time. I want to know if confidence in the training is increasing. Meditation instruction and guidance have to be adjusted to each individual all the time. As the meditation progresses, my questions become more precise and probing. If a student has the time to meditate for one, two or three months, then a lot of progress can be made. But even a week or a weekend is useful if the meditator's time is limited.

Some new students worry about interviews and feel uncomfortable and nervous. They become excited and let mindfulness slip away when speaking. They should focus on moment-to-moment practicing only. With more experience they will be able to maintain continuity of mindfulness during interviews, focusing on their speech and mental states.

I am very pleased when a meditator asks questions in order to resolve doubts. We cannot practice well when doubt confuses the mind. It is necessary for the student and teacher to be open-hearted with each other so that the interviews can advance the learning process.

Q: How can I strengthen my practice so that I won't be dependent on the protected environment of a meditation center?

Achan: Learning the fundamentals of vipassana training in a meditation center is useful but once some skill has been developed, a person's understanding will naturally deepen if he is practicing correctly. Whenever possible, a student should try to return to the center for at least a week or ten days of intensive practice.

The quiet atmosphere of a center is helpful during the initial training for beginners. Although solitude and quiet are necessary for meditators who practice concentration meditation, they are not so important for insight meditation practice. All of the five senses need fairly normal stimulation for advanced vipassana work. It's a test for the insight meditator to see how he can cope with hearing various sounds and so on. All instances of sense-contact can become learning situations. A vipassana meditator needs to know where the defilements live! He should not run away from them.

Even a short period set aside for meditation each day, or whenever possible, can establish a useful habit. Keep your practice simple. Don't ritualize it, making it a cause for attachment.

Vipassana practice should not be too tight or too loose. Thorough investigation is accomplished by energy and interest. At all times we need to use skillful means to bring the practice into our everyday lives, whether we're at home or at work. Otherwise vipassana practice is never tested in the real world. It remains only a training to be done in a special environment.

So please continue your practice until there are no more doubts, until there is only brightness and assurance in your heart and mind.

Chapter Four: Interviews with Meditators

The following meditation interviews trace the practice of two students, Bob and Betty, beginning on the seventh day of practice. This is the first time they have practiced vipassana intensively.

Since the details of each meditator's experience differ, the reader is reminded that the instruction given here is provided only as a guide for the student who lacks access to a qualified instructor. Of course, no written statement can replace the personal guidance of a skilled teacher.

The instruction given below is based on two meditation exercises: 1) An exercise called "rising-falling-sitting-touching." In this method one focuses on the rising and falling movements of the abdomen in respiration, then on the sitting posture, and then on a designated spot on the body, in that order. After finishing the sequence, one starts over again from the beginning. 2) A type of walking meditation in which each step is divided into three or more smaller movements, as taught by the late meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma.²⁷

Day 7

Achan: Now that you have been practicing for seven days and mindfulness is stronger, have you noticed anything about the movements of the abdomen?

Betty: Yes. There is a gap between one cycle of rising-and-falling and the next round of movement.

Achan: Good. The fact that you perceive a gap means that mindfulness is following the abdominal movements well. When a meditator is clearly aware of a space after the falling movement, we have to give the mind additional objects to put its attention on, the way you would spoon-feed a baby. At this point in your practice, if you only put your attention on the rising and falling movements, the mind will have a chance to stray. We have to give it more work to do.

I would like you to focus on the abdominal movements, the sitting posture, and touching, in order: rising; falling; sitting; and touching. Focus on each object for one

²⁷ For detailed instruction on these two meditation methods see Achan Sobin Namto's book, *Mindfulness Step by Step: a Pictorial Manual for Meditators*, and his website: www.vipassanadhura.com.

moment only. By sitting I mean the sitting posture itself. By “touching,” I mean *mental touching*, not physical impact. Actually, they are the same reality. It is the mind that focuses on and knows the perception of touch. Touching is always a mental phenomenon. Focus on the touching point as being a small circle. Choose one area, such as the lower back. Place your attention on that point for one moment, while mentally noting “touching.”

After doing this exercise I want to see if you can move your mind and have it “touch” a different area of your body. Choose the point that is most distinct to you: your knee, shoulder, or another part. Whatever body part you choose, use that spot as the touch-point until we have another interview tomorrow. Your mindfulness is stronger now, and I want to increase your level of concentration to balance with it. Concentration will not arise if the focus-point is changed too often. Also, I would like you to test your mindfulness by walking slowly for one session, and in the next walking almost normally. Please report your results tomorrow.

Day 8

Achan: How is your mindfulness today?

Bob: This morning mindfulness wasn’t good at all. Nothing seemed to go right, and my practice was falling apart. I was really depressed. In the afternoon it was better.

Achan: At this early stage of training it is not unusual to be up and down. Meditators become very sensitive to changing conditions of mind and get upset or worried easily. Then they often swing to the other extreme by having a period of fairly steady mindfulness and feel quite pleased. Beginning meditators tend to make judgments: this is good practice, this is bad practice. Elation and depression are both forms of *clinging*. You will inevitably be frustrated when conditions change.

Bob: Why is this happening?

Achan: You are making too much effort, putting too much energy into your practice. It is *imbalanced*. Strain leads to discouragement, which in turn drains mindfulness. Happiness, too, pulls you off-center and slows your development. But if you become aware of these states as mental objects, then mindfulness has not been lost.

The up and down nature of your practice is itself proof of impermanence. *Everything in life is uncertain*. We cannot control events as much as we think we can, and it makes us uneasy to admit this fact. We are experts in suppressing this aspect of life most of the time. What you have experienced first-hand proves many of the Buddha’s teachings. The potential for dissatisfaction is always present.

Though we cannot fully control any situation, we can learn to *watch* the mind and give up attachments and unrealistic expectations. But we need sufficient clarity of mind. We can make our best effort to adapt to a challenging situation. Ultimately we will realize that all things are in a state of constant flux.

When we train our minds through insight meditation we begin to understand life as it is. The disappointments and problems of life have value as teaching experiences if we truly see what they are showing us. If we can do that we'll save ourselves a lot of stress, frustration and pain. But we don't have to become cynical and disillusioned by seeing this. Instead we can work to correct the situation.

Day 9

Achan: Are you able to clearly focus on the abdominal movements, the sitting posture and the touch-points?

Betty: Yes. Most of the time the meditation objects are quite clear.

Achan: Try to notice each object of attention equally clearly. They are all of *equal* value. All of them arise-and-vanish.

Each phase of the exercise should be clear: the contraction and expansion of the abdomen, the sitting, and the touching. You are practicing the three-part walking step, right? You should clearly know the lifting of the foot, the action of moving it forward, and the act of placing it down. By "clear" I mean *focusing in the present moment*. Noticing how each movement arises, stays momentarily, and then ceases.

The clarity I want you to develop is similar to watching raindrops falling into a pond: seeing how each drop falls, and how bubbles arise and the water moves outward in a circle, finally spreading out into nothingness. Try to know each meditation object with this kind of precise clarity.

Yesterday I asked you to test mindfulness by walking slowly at first and then faster. At first, slowing your pace decelerates the speed of the mind. Was there any difference between the two ways of walking?

Betty: Both the slower and faster walking were clear most of the time.

Achan: Slow walking is a training exercise for mindfulness. If you can keep the same level of mindfulness when walking at a more normal pace, then do so. It's like riding a bicycle. At first you have to be very careful and hold on with both hands. As your skill develops, you can relax and even let go with one hand . . . or both. But you have to be aware of what you are doing!

Walking faster helps prevent laziness which can occur when only doing slow movements, but you shouldn't walk at a natural pace for very long during the retreat. It

is easy to become careless and “forget” mindfulness. Your ability has been sharpened now. I want you to take good care of mindfulness.

Betty: Concentration seems to be more balanced now and not too strong. Why has it lessened?

Achan: Testing your mindfulness is a way of correcting your overbalance of concentration. When you started the retreat your concentration was much too intense, which is often the case for meditators who practice alone. If they have previously practiced some form of concentration meditation, they often have too much concentration for vipassana practice. Some people naturally have more concentration than others. When tranquility is strong the meditator feels drowsy, dull or simply peaceful. It is very important to know that mindfulness is imbalanced and weakened when concentration is raised.

From now on I have to watch your meditation progress carefully and closely guide your practice. Concentration will still tend to fluctuate. The way to increase concentration to balance with your strengthening mindfulness is to sit for longer periods. Right now there is no other work for you to do except watching the appearing-and-disappearing of mental and physical states. Do you have any questions?

Betty: No. Thank you.

(Later the same day)

Achan: Can you focus equally well on the abdominal movements, sitting and touching?

Bob: The abdominal movements are always clearer than the touching.

Achan: These movements are a natural activity, so they are usually clearer. The abdominal movements in breathing are always present whether we focus on them or not. Focusing on touching is not as natural — it is more artificial. But mental “touching” is the most important kind of touching! When a thought arises, it touches the mind. The meditator needs to be mindful of the thought. In insight meditation we only need to know the objects touching the mind, in the present moment, as they arise-and-vanish.

When you are aware of thinking as *merely thinking*, you can observe how thoughts arise-and-vanish. We use the mind to focus on thought in the same way we use it to focus on other objects that contact the mind, such as sound. When we’re aware of phenomena arising-and-vanishing, there is no clinging, and no suffering.

I would like you to focus your mindfulness on touching until the perception of touch is as clear as the perception of the rising-falling movements of the abdomen.

Bob: Yesterday I experienced a tremendous sense of impermanence. It was overpowering, and much stronger than anything I've ever experienced. Today it recurred, but not to such an intense degree. Will it go back to its original strength?

Achan: If you want it to recur because of curiosity or ego involvement, it will not reappear. In fact, wanting it to return will decrease your mindfulness. It may return naturally if you relax and do not think about past experiences. In vipassana practice we are only concerned with the *present* moment. Just continue to develop mindfulness. As a beginner, that is your only duty.

Don't feel that something is being lost. You are not losing anything. Sometimes we don't want to moderate our feelings. We think we'll miss certain experiences. As you continue to cultivate mindfulness, the natural development of higher stages of insight will help loosen this particular attachment.

Day 10

Betty: I have physical pain almost all the time now. I decided to rest most of the day, and I wonder now if I was right to give in to discomfort so easily.

Achan: It is correct you rested. But the problem is that you had to temporarily break your schedule, slowing you down. Meditators with a lot more experience would have been able to incorporate extended rest into their practice day and still maintain mindfulness, but beginners in this situation will usually lose awareness quickly.

Betty: Yes. It took two hours of walking practice for mindfulness to resume its former strength.

Achan: A new meditator has to use a lot of effort to regain lost territory in his practice. It is like paddling a boat upstream: stop for an instant and the waves immediately push you back.

It is normal for physical problems to arise in the course of practice, and how we handle them is a test of our progress in mental development. Pain is one kind of obstacle the meditator has to face. We practice insight meditation to understand the root cause of suffering and anxiety. Physical pain is the most obvious form of suffering. But physical obstacles are preferable to mental ones. Sometimes we battle with the mind and lose. When a physical problem arises during practice, rest will usually relieve the discomfort and practice can then be resumed.

Betty: When mindfulness is strong I can sometimes just look at the discomfort and see it as pure pain, without an emotional overlay. But most of time I can't be so objective.

Achan: We usually learn more about the nature of clinging when we're ill than when we're healthy. In fact, good health is only a relative condition. We need to pay particular attention to bodily stress. We are usually oblivious to this because the distractions and changes of posture in everyday life mask the subtle undercurrent of tension.

The meditator needs to understand well the arising of emotional states associated with physical discomfort. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not advocating self-torture or pain for pain's sake. The ego would get involved in such a situation. And beginners cannot attain any concentration if pain is too strong. This is important to understand. But at a certain point in insight practice, the more pain a meditator experiences, the more obvious is the universal nature of suffering. Each one of us fears pain, and so it is imperative that we observe it and confront our fears. The Buddha and the enlightened disciples had to understand suffering, *dukkha*, in order to realize the cessation of suffering.

I know it is difficult for you now, but you should not be overly concerned or upset with temporary physical discomfort. Meditators should content themselves and make haste to practice so that suffering can be conquered for all time.

You have entered a period of intensive vipassana practice. If that training is temporarily stopped now, you will continue to be caught in the web of the five groups of clinging, which are: bodily form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. They are the conditions which cause *enormous distress* in our lives.

There is another kind of pain that arises specifically in vipassana practice. It makes us tired of pain, *all pain*, and weary of revolving in the cycle of birth-and-death. The understanding of this kind of pain strengthens our resolve to escape suffering once and for all.

The Buddha taught a method of spiritual development which can be called "non-violent practice." It applies to meditation when we have to endure the frustration, discomfort, and mental turmoil which beset all meditators. A meditator should try to bear these feelings without aversion.

In regard to non-violence, the Buddha said that receiving insults is better than being struck. Being struck is better than being killed. Being killed is better than

you “killing yourself.” Killing yourself refers to the decision to fight another person, which might result in your killing him. That unwholesome action or karma would follow you into the future, causing you much greater, repeated suffering than if someone had killed you just once.

Applied to mind-development, the nonviolent principle means neither running from pain nor torturing ourselves by “killing” our training and wasting the opportunity to realize insight-knowledge. If we make the effort to endure minor discomforts we will make progress toward permanent freedom from suffering.

Regardless of how many times you have to mindfully change posture to relieve pain, you should resolve to continue your practice and not break the flow of mindfulness and concentration. Strong confidence in the Dhamma and commitment to the practice will support you during the difficult times.

(Same day)

Bob: I injured my leg slightly before coming to practice. When I focus on the pain, it diminishes a bit but never really goes away.

Achan: The mind is exaggerating the pain, concentrating its force in a weakened area. There are two main ways to handle pain in vipassana practice. One, you can continue to meditate and mindfully change position whenever necessary.

The second method requires well-developed mindfulness and concentration. You can continue to meditate, observing the discomfort, until the painful sensation separates itself from the mind. There is a difference between the mere sensation of pain and the emotional overlay of aversion or anger associated with it.

The latter method is a way of separating mental images. If the meditator has sufficient mindfulness, he can take the mind away from the body.

If you focus your attention on the pain itself, you will see it arise and then vanish. If the pain does not disappear, observe the mind itself. When mindfulness is strong there will be nothing that “sees” the pain, and the pain will disappear.

I have noticed that your mindfulness is stronger in the morning than in the afternoon or evening. I suggest you save some of your strength by doing more walking instead of sitting meditation in the morning. That will give you a reservoir of strength that will help you overcome the discomfort in the afternoon. You need to find skillful ways of adjusting your practice.

When you first started the retreat your mindfulness was uneven. If you were attending a longer retreat, this imbalance would be resolved and concentration and mindfulness would equalize throughout the day and night.

Day 11

Betty: I am concerned. I'm beginning to experience hallucinations and sensory distortions. What is happening?

Achan: Such phenomena happen to almost every meditator. These phenomena may arise at any point in practice when mindfulness begins to strengthen. Visions occur most frequently when sitting. It is a posture in which concentration can grow rapidly. If these visions do not appear at this level, you will confront them at another time. You can safely overcome these challenges if you follow the directions carefully and make sure to clarify any doubts.

You are moving through one stage and approaching a higher level of meditation. The gap between these two stages is too wide and the mind has an opportunity to play tricks. A meditator may be so shaken by these experiences that he may find it very hard to focus his attention. But he should understand that these unusual phenomena arise from his own mind. They are temptations born to lure the meditator away from correct practice. What happens is that, when external phenomena are no longer distracting, the imagination attacks by creating pictures or other distortions. If you cling to these visions, mindfulness will be scattered or even destroyed. This is also a test for you, to determine if you have enough understanding of your own mental processes.

If you see pictures when your eyes are closed, and fear and agitation arise, meditate with your eyes open until you feel stronger. Relax and do not strain. Overexertion will only increase the tension and create more images. If the pictures keep flooding your mind and mindfulness cannot keep pace, try to take longer breaths. If necessary, get up and walk or stand. If you experience sensory distortion when walking, then walk faster. Your problem is that concentration is too high now. That's what usually happens when a meditator first begins vipassana practice. But if you follow these instructions, you will be able to reestablish mindfulness.

During this retreat, direct all your attention toward focusing on whatever phenomenon is arising-and-vanishing in consciousness, and then let it go. That should be your only concern. Focus and forget it! Even if you see the Buddha or Christ in your imagination, do not let that or anything whatsoever divert your attention from the practice. Don't think about previous meditation

experiences. Those experiences have come and gone. If you dwell on them you will get distracted and mindfulness will decrease.

Following these instructions is important. Many meditators who do not have competent guidance give up vipassana practice completely when they have visions. They fear the past and the future.

When I was teaching in Thailand, some meditators who reached this stage would often see ghosts. Even though I told them to come and see me immediately if any visions occurred, some of them lost control of themselves completely and ran away from the temple. I would have to find them and try to persuade them to continue practicing. If they had not resumed the practice at that point they would have surrendered to their anxiety. I recall one man who was so frightened he ran away and climbed to the top of the stupa in our temple. When he came to his senses he couldn't climb down. We had to get a coconut-picker to get him down!

When we gain the skill of cutting off external disturbances by watching the arising-and-vanishing of phenomena, internal obstacles will soon be overcome. Freedom will appear when we succeed in conquering all obstacles.

The skilled meditator who is familiar with every step in training will know how to approach any problem in practice. Whenever he sees, hears, touches, tastes, smells or thinks, he will be able to detect the arising-and-disappearing of phenomena without being attached to any situation.

Day 12

Betty: My breathing is very shallow now and sometimes I can hardly catch my breath. I become frightened.

Achan: This is a normal occurrence in the last moment before you make a final decision to enter deep meditation. When the mind begins to separate itself from the identification of the body as self, it is natural to experience these unsettling conditions of mind.

Meditators sometimes feel that everything is out of control, or that something is being lost. The breath becomes almost imperceptible. When fear occurs, immediately collect yourself and focus accurately on the emotion, and it will disappear.

If you stop practice now you will meet these same difficulties whenever you resume it. You should try to continue with your practice even when mindfulness is not very clear. Mindfulness will naturally get stronger if you

simply keep noting the clarity or unclarity of your attention. Everyone has the same feelings. They are an inevitable part of the maturation process.

(Late evening) Achan: You look anxious.

Betty: I feel afraid so much of the time now. It is a strange kind of unnamed fear. I sometimes find myself weeping.

Achan: We are composed of the five groups of clinging, the five khandhas. Some of them can function as *Mara*. “Mara” is a Pali word for that part of the mind which opposes our liberation. Many aspects of Mara will appear during training. Unhealthy mental attitudes may arise sharply to test your endurance and commitment. How you work with them reveals the strength of your mindfulness. Right now there is a battle between the part of the mind that wishes to maintain the discipline of the practice and the opposing force tempting you to abandon it. The latter is giving you great anxiety.

Before beginning vipassana practice you mentally dedicated yourself to the training. Now you can put your mind at ease and be confident that the teachings will guide and support you. The Dhamma is protecting you from harm. There is nothing to fear if you are willing to place your confidence in the truth of the Dhamma as the vehicle that ends all suffering.

To the best of my ability, I will help you solve any problems. Actually, you could have come to me immediately instead of spending time worrying and thereby losing mindfulness. But it’s all right. Don’t push yourself too hard.

Although it is difficult for you now, this is actually a sign of progress. Some meditators practice for an entire month without having fear arise.²⁸ These difficulties are not monumental. I have experienced them, too. All insight meditators have to pass through this stage.

If you can conquer these particular hindrances you will not experience them again. Resolve to go ahead with your practice. It is fear that is causing you to hesitate. It is fear that will keep you from progressing. Even the Buddha himself had to contend with Mara. Do you understand? Are you all right?

Betty: Yes. I feel reassured now. Thank you.

²⁸ It is not ordinary fear that is meant, but a special type of fear peculiar to vipassana that appears temporarily when a meditator reaches an intermediate level of insight-knowledge.

Day 13

Achan (addressing both meditators):

I feel your concentration and mindfulness are more balanced now, and all the conditions are ripe for both of you to make a special effort in your practice. This test is a normal part of the strengthening process. Such tests help determine how well a skill is being cultivated. The meditation masters of Southeast Asia often test meditators in this way.

Continue to mindfully acknowledge all objects coming into consciousness, from moment to moment, as accurately as possible. A high-jumper puts his energy into his legs, establishes one-pointedness of mind, makes a mental commitment and then runs quickly. In the same way, I want you to make a commitment by consolidating all your energies into a single effort. When all the factors of the Eightfold Path coalesce into one great effort, insight has a chance to arise.

If a higher realization is going to occur, it will arise in a natural way and as a result of correct and continuous practice. If it does not occur at this time, it will do so in the future with continued practice.

There is no way of predicting when such an experience will happen. It may take five minutes, a few hours, or nothing may happen. Remember, if you wish for something to happen, it is an ego-play. Do not weaken your practice by wishing for an experience. Other meditators feel so happy at this stage that they become careless. Stay even-minded and watchful.

It is important to be on guard at all times. The meditator, like the athlete, may suddenly be distracted and find the mind pulling him back. You must be willing to stand firm.

If you experience fear or some other emotion you can't handle, stop practicing and immediately see me for further instructions. If you feel you are going to "die," then let everything go. You will "die" for a few moments, and then return to normal consciousness. At that time you will experience a particular understanding. It cannot be described. It will never be forgotten.

This "dying" or cessation is a normal condition of body-and-mind which appears when the meditator focuses precisely on the arising-and-vanishing of phenomena. As his focusing becomes more powerful, the momentum quickens until arising-and-vanishing seems to stop. Practice begins to mature at this stage.

Do the best you can. Give up the idea of gaining anything. Just work naturally and stay in the middle path.

Day 14

Achan: Yesterday I asked you both to make a special effort in your practice. Do you have anything to report?

Betty: I noticed a very bright, white light — as if someone had opened a door. It stayed for quite awhile and then gradually faded. This morning my body seemed very fragile, like glass. I had a deep sense of dissolution all morning. The only other thing is that I have stopped naming objects and making judgments: “this is good,” or “this is bad.” There is just seeing, hearing, and so on. Nothing else happened.

Achan: When mindfulness stays in the present, from moment to moment, the naming of objects no longer happens. The bright light means the mind is beginning to clear. At this point in your practice you cannot see the truth directly. Your perception is mixed with thinking. Please go on with your practice.

Bob: I had a strange meditation experience lasting about an hour. At first I felt engulfed in absolute silence, and then I found myself encased in clouds. There was a sensation of movement and I seemed to forget my body. Colors changed from brown to gray to white. I felt I was in a space found inside an arena. Suddenly a battle started in my head. I could feel my face going through all kinds of contortions. My head began swinging around, being pulled in every direction, as though two enemies were fighting for control. I could not stop the battle or the movement. My eyes suddenly shut, and then there was a flash of light, and I would be back again in the battleground. The flash occurred again, and everything finally died away. After that episode I was completely exhausted. I could not focus my mindfulness or concentration. I am very tired now.

Achan: You are not moving through the entire stage. If all the spiritual faculties of confidence, effort, concentration, mindfulness and wisdom were concentrated into one force, it would have carried you through to a new level. The flash of light you experienced and the immediate return to the battleground suggest that you hit a barrier, preventing you from going on. As I mentioned previously, when mindfulness is powerful, you will feel that suddenly something “turns off.”

Practicing mindfulness is like walking in the dark. Walking in the dark means being surrounded by greed, hatred and delusion. During practice the meditator often feels that no good exists in the world at all. All the defiling impulses in the mind seem to engulf him. When these flashes of light first occur and remain only an instant, nothing can be seen or understood very clearly. But if you continue your training, these moments of illumination will happen more often.

As the mind brightens you will be able to reach out of the darkness. When the mind starts to clear you will begin to see things as they truly are. You will start making your ascent to higher degrees of insight-knowledge.

(Addressing both meditators):

This experiment has been a useful test. It shows what remains to be done in your training. You will reach the next stage if you persevere in the practice.

Now that this retreat is coming to a close, I want to encourage you to take every opportunity to practice vipassana intensively. Try to practice everywhere! Make mindfulness first in your life. If you take care of mindfulness, it will take care of you.

In the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness* discourse the Buddha gives a guarantee. If we correctly and continuously practice non-stop mindfulness for seven years, seven months, or even seven days, we will eventually realize a stage of enlightenment and enter what is called the stream to Nibbana.²⁹

²⁹ The time periods mentioned, which are only approximations, refer to *continuous*, precise mindfulness as practiced in a meditation retreat. During daily life it is not possible to maintain the same level of detailed mindfulness from moment to moment. The stream to Nibbana refers to the fact that a meditator who reaches the first stage of enlightenment will “flow” inevitably toward Nibbana just as all streams flow to the ocean. He is guaranteed to attain full enlightenment within seven lifetimes. Whether a meditator enters the stream in seven days, months or years of practice depends on his natural aptitude. Often people practice longer than seven years and still do not reach the first level of enlightenment. This could be due to the fact that a person’s mindfulness is not yet truly continuous. Nevertheless, it is said that anyone who continues practicing will be able to realize enlightenment at some time in the future.

Chapter Five: Cultivating the Spiritual Faculties

Introduction

In insight meditation there are five spiritual faculties indispensable for progress on the path. All too often these qualities are overlooked or remain underdeveloped. Cultivating these faculties to their maximum level will greatly help a student's practice.

The five spiritual faculties are classed among the *vipassana bhumis*, the working-grounds for establishing insight. The ancient meditation text *The Path of Purification (Visuddhi Magga)* gives a detailed explanation of the faculties.

The five faculties serve and guide the meditator along the path. With a good car and a detailed map, a skilled driver can successfully negotiate rough terrain and arrive at his destination. In a similar way, the spiritual faculties can help us reach Nibbana.

On the other hand, a car in poor condition causes lots of trouble and may be dangerous. And if our map is inaccurate and there's no guide available, we can't be sure when — if ever — we'll reach our destination.

If the car breaks down we have to stop driving for awhile and make repairs. But with mechanical skill and the proper tools, the journey can be resumed in a short time. Likewise, adjustments have to be made quite often in vipassana practice. Sometimes we even have to return to the techniques given in the early stages of training in order to correct our mistakes.

An imbalance of the spiritual faculties often appears when a meditator practices alone, without the guidance of an experienced teacher. This can cause havoc in a student's practice. We should be watchful in order to prevent carelessness or indulgence from disturbing the proper balance of the five spiritual faculties. A skillful instructor can help the meditator, but it is better if the student learns how to correct his own mistakes.

In actual meditation practice, we simply focus our mindfulness on one of the faculties when it appears spontaneously in consciousness. Acknowledging its presence will act as a balancing agent, either increasing or decreasing its strength as needed.

Confidence Faculty

Confidence is regarded as the major spiritual faculty, and it corresponds to the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, right understanding. The faculty of confidence in vipassana practice differs from ordinary conviction in the Buddhist teachings. We have a saying in Thailand that ordinary confidence in the teachings is like the head of a turtle: it appears and disappears frequently.

Guarded by mindfulness and balanced by the wisdom faculty, confidence is crucial in guiding the meditator along the practice-path. Confidence comes from seeing the benefits of working to eliminate our mental obsessions, and understanding how the meditation technique actually achieves this. Confidence is developed and maintained by taking the initiative to investigate the teachings. It carries no element of blind faith or trust. It is the conviction that liberation from unsatisfactoriness *can* be realized by one's own efforts. Having confidence also means we understand that the Dhamma is a body of teachings that are always available and can be personally investigated by anyone at any time. In another sense, confidence means having faith in the sangha — the Buddhist community of monks, nuns and laypeople — as being capable of transmitting the proper training method.

As it applies to insight meditation, confidence means understanding the value of proper instruction about how to focus on meditation objects. Confidence, as an object of mindfulness to be observed during vipassana meditation, fluctuates. When confidence is weak, indications such as confusion or restlessness appear. Other indications are boredom with the practice, the teacher, or the environment of the meditation center. The student may also feel he does not have enough energy, commitment, or merit to continue, and may actually stop practicing.

A meditator should be on guard against an overly-confident attitude as well as a loss of confidence. He should take steps to moderate either situation so that his practice may continue in a balanced manner.

Effort Faculty

The faculty of effort or energy is generated by confidence and balanced by concentration. The mindfulness faculty is an aspect of effort.

Effort translates as the commitment to achieving one's spiritual goals and the determination to pursue meditation practice without giving in to obstacles. Opposed to indolence, effort suffuses the entire mental life of a meditator.

The responsibility for meditation practice ultimately rests with each individual himself. Right effort supports a meditator's search for correct vipassana instruction.

During actual vipassana practice the effort faculty occurs when mindfulness focuses on the complete and correct meditation object in the present moment, in its appearing-and-disappearing stages. An excess of effort manifests as restlessness. It is counterbalanced by concentration.

Concentration Faculty

Concentration conquers distraction and diffuseness of mind. To function optimally, concentration needs to be balanced with effort and mindfulness.

During meditation practice the concentration faculty appears when mindfulness focuses on objects in consciousness, from moment-to-moment — one object at a time.

A meditator who has previously practiced samadhi often has excessive concentration, and it is difficult for him to acknowledge his present bodily posture or any sense-object such as a sound. His mind often becomes dull, silent or sleepy, especially when sitting. He may want to sit for long periods. Attached to silence and inactivity, the meditator is very comfortable and does not want to be disturbed or change his posture.

This dull, sinking mind makes it impossible for mindfulness to acknowledge the flux of objects. It is a common problem. If the student — or the teacher — doesn't notice it, the situation can last for months, even years. Actually, the meditator is practicing concentration meditation, not vipassana. Without correction this problem will block further progress.

But if the meditator becomes aware of the excessive concentration and can focus on the fact of having a silent or dull mind, then progress along the path of insight can continue.

If tranquility does not diminish after acknowledging the dull mind, it may help to focus on the state of lowered mindfulness or strong concentration itself in an effort to wake up the mind. If the meditator is unable to disperse the excessive concentration he can do walking meditation or perform a simple activity in order to reduce the effects of the strong tranquility.

Mindfulness Faculty

Bonded to all five spiritual faculties, mindfulness is generated from both confidence and effort. Mindfulness is the harmonizing factor in correct vipassana practice. It is balanced by concentration and effort.

The mindfulness faculty overcomes confusion and restlessness, and prevents the dispersion of the other faculties. As a conditioned phenomenon, mindfulness is

impermanent. It has the nature of momentarily appearing-and-vanishing, as do all the other spiritual faculties.

Wisdom Faculty

Wisdom and confidence balance each other. Experiencing the wisdom (or knowledge) faculty clearly is a milestone in training, but it is not enlightenment. However, meditators who clearly experience impermanence, unsatisfactoriness or nonselfness are assisted by this breakthrough. Ignorance is not totally eliminated at this stage, but it is overpowered and subdued. The meditator no longer has to depend on the reports of others regarding certain aspects of the Dhamma.

Playing a dominant role in the mind, wisdom controls the mental factors opposed to spiritual development such as doubt, carelessness, idleness and delusion.

The direct knowledge of bodily and mental processes advances the meditator on the path, but it is still only mundane knowledge. The objects of the senses are worldly tools for vipassana practice. As we said earlier, until the experience of enlightenment all knowledge is mundane.

Chapter Six:

Grounds for Establishing Insight (Vipassana Bhumi)

Although the *Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness* is the primary text for vipassana instruction, ancient commentators produced a helpful outline culled from the Pali Canon called *The Grounds for Establishing Insight* (in Pali, *Vipassana Bhumi*).³⁰

The *Vipassana Bhumi* is a catalog of all the meditation objects that can be used for vipassana practice. Objects for concentration meditation are excluded. This comprehensive listing accommodates differences of temperament, allowing the practice to be tailored to a meditator's individual inclinations. Further, the catalog of bhumis classifies meditation objects as either mental or material, making for easy understanding.

Even today, Theravadan Buddhist monks chant the bhumis as a reminder of the entire path of practice, from the initial stages to full enlightenment. Few books are written on the vipassana bhumis. They are almost unknown in Western meditation circles.

The word "bhumi" means soil, or a medium or culture that something will grow in. The *Vipassana Bhumi* describes the different mediums suitable for the growth of insight-knowledge. The medium most appropriate for a particular student depends on his temperament, inclinations, understanding of the Dhamma, and other factors.

The first meditation object listed in the bhumis consists of the five aggregates of clinging, which is suitable for most meditators. But occasionally a student having a particular background may realize intuitive insight by focusing his mindfulness on one of the other meditation subjects.

Any mental or physical object described in the bhumis, as long as it is suited to a meditator's temperament, is an appropriate object for vipassana practice: tactile sensation, thought processes, bodily movement, visual forms, and so on may all be used as a student's main meditation object.

A musician, for example, may find that focusing on hearing is a suitable exercise, provided he does not have too much attachment to sounds or concentrate on them too strongly. If the student can focus on the object

³⁰ The complete *Vipassana Bhumi* can be found in the Glossary.

correctly, then it is suitable. Otherwise, another primary object should be chosen.

For the meditator using the bhumis as a guide, the choice of an appropriate object is not always obvious, and the guidance of a skilled teacher is indispensable. According to the Pali texts the Buddha sometimes gave a specific meditation object to a disciple in accordance with his psychological background and tendencies. A meditation instructor should get to know the natural tendencies of a student. Using one of the bhumis can help a meditator who has made little progress after long and careful practice with the more traditional meditation objects.

Note that Bhumis No. 20-22 of group IV are only appropriate for people who have already realized a level of enlightenment and have dispelled attachment to certain mental defilements.

As a meditator progresses he can gauge the level of his own previous realizations more accurately, just as a Ph.D. looks back and understands his undergraduate experiences more clearly when viewed in a wider context. For those who have already realized stream-entry, practicing with one of the more advanced bhumis helps to demonstrate how much is yet to be accomplished.

Chapter Seven:
A Manual for Checking Vipassana Progress
For Teachers and Advanced Meditators

This section is the original work of the late Ven. Phra Dhamma Theerarach Mahamuni, one of the most highly respected Thai vipassana teachers of the age, who passed away in 1988. To honor his memory and work, this publication is being presented to a larger audience of English-speaking vipassana practitioners.

The material in this chapter has been supplemented with a commentary in italics by Achan Sobin S. Namto that expands on the experiences that may occur at the various stages of meditation practice.

The original booklet was produced in 1961 by the Division of Vipassana Dhura at the Mahadhatu Monastery, Bangkok. A revised English version (the 7th Edition), reprinted in 1988, was translated by Helen and Vorasak Jandamit, who kindly gave their permission for republication. The main text has been slightly edited for this publication.

Caution: The instructions presented in this guide are suitable for vipassana instructors, teacher-trainees and advanced vipassana meditators. They are not intended for people with little experience in vipassana meditation. It goes without saying that this instruction is not a substitute for the personal guidance of a competent meditation teacher.

This manual describes certain aspects of meditation training which have been observed by meditation masters in the vipassana tradition. But meditators bring to their practice a variety of temperaments and backgrounds. Not every event described in this section will be experienced by every meditator, nor in the exact order in which it is listed.

For further reading on the stages of insight knowledge, meditators may consult *The Progress of Insight*, by Mahasi Sayadaw, and the classic meditation treatise, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhi Magga)*, by Bhandantacariya Buddhaghosa, translated by Nanamoli Thera.

The Sixteen Stages of Insight Knowledge

- I. Knowledge of the Distinction Between Mental and Physical States
- II. Knowledge of the Cause-And-Effect Relationship Between Mental and Physical States

- III. Knowledge of mental and physical processes as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self
 - IV. Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away
 - V. Knowledge of the Dissolution (Ceasing) of Formations
 - VI. Knowledge of the Fearful Nature of Mental and Physical States
 - VII. Knowledge of Mental and Physical States as Unsatisfactory
 - VIII. Knowledge of Disenchantment
 - IX. Knowledge of the Desire to Abandon the Worldly State
 - X. Knowledge Which Investigates the Path to Deliverance and Instills a Decision to Practice Further, to Completion
 - XI. Knowledge Which Regards Mental and Physical States With Dispassion
 - XII. Knowledge Which Conforms to the Four Noble Truths, Prepares for Entry to the Path, Attains the Fruit of the Path, and Approaches Nibbana (Nirvana) by Way of Either Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness or Not-Self
 - XIII. Knowledge of Deliverance From the Worldly Condition
 - XIV. Knowledge by Which Defilements Are Abandoned and Overcome by Destruction
 - XV. Knowledge Which Realizes the Fruit of the Path and Has Nibbana as its Object
 - XVI. Knowledge Which Reviews the Defilements Still Remaining
- I. Knowledge of the Distinction Between Mental and Physical States
 - a. Distinguishing mental processes from physical processes, and vice-versa.
 - i. The rising and falling of the abdomen is form; the acknowledgement of the movement is known by the mind (Note: By “rising and falling of the abdomen” we are referring to the expansion of the abdomen that occurs when inhaling, and the deflation of the abdomen that happens when exhaling. We have designated the abdominal movements as the primary object of mindfulness, rather than the breath. The meditator should observe only the movement of the abdomen, and should not follow or pay attention to the breath. The other main exercise is walking meditation. At that time the primary object of mindfulness is the movement of the feet).

- ii. The movement of the feet is form; the acknowledgement of the movement is known by the mind.

Commentary: "knowing" is the function of the observing mind. In insight meditation, "knowing" has only one meaning: being aware of mental and physical objects arising-and-disappearing on a momentary basis (one object at a time).

The Pali word "nama" means mind, consisting of consciousness and mental factors. Mental factors include mindfulness, feeling, aversion, confidence, joy, delusion, conceit, and so forth.

The origin or location of the mind (except for certain functions of the brain) is not known. A defilement is that which sullies something originally pure. The first stage of insight-knowledge is the transition point between mundane knowledge and seeing life as it really is.

b. Distinguishing mentality and materiality.

- i. When seeing a visible form, the eyes and color are material form; the consciousness of seeing is known by the mind.
- ii. When hearing a sound, the ear and the sound are material form; the consciousness of hearing is known by the mind.
- iii. When smelling, the nose and fragrance are material form; the consciousness of smelling is known by the mind.
- iv. When tasting, the tongue and flavor are material form; the consciousness of tasting is known by the mind.
- v. When touching, the body and the object contacted (whether it is cold, hot, soft or hard) are material form; the consciousness of tactile contact is known by the mind.
- vi. When thinking, the idea that is contacted is form; the consciousness of thinking is known by the mind.
- vii. When sitting, the bodily posture is form; sitting is known by the mind.
- viii. When standing, the body is form; standing is known by the mind.

- ix. When walking, the body is form; walking is known by the mind.
- x. When reclining, the body is form; reclining is known by the mind.

Commentary: The whole body is form, and the mind perceives materiality. Nothing but mind-and-matter (nama-rupa) exists in the world. Conventionally, we designate objects with names or labels. Ultimately, however, there is no "being," no "I," no "he," no "she," no self.

II. Knowledge of the Cause-And-Effect Relationship Between Mental And Physical Processes

- a. Form is sometimes a causal condition, and a mental condition is the result — for instance, when the abdomen moves and the mind's acknowledgment follows immediately.
- b. At other times, the mind is the cause and form is the result, as in the case of volitional activity which precedes physical action. In this case, the intention to move is the cause, the body's movement, the result. The intention to sit is the cause; the act of sitting, the result.
- c. The abdomen may rise, but it fails to fall immediately.

Commentary: The breath's irregular movement demonstrates the truth of change.

At various times during insight practice, meditators often develop an excess of tranquility (concentration) or one-pointedness. At that time, feeling subsides and calmness controls the body.

- d. The abdomen may fall deeply and remain in that position for an extended period of time.
- e. Rising and falling may seem to disappear. One has to place the hand on the abdomen in order to feel the movement.
- f. At times meditators may feel disturbed, endangered or ill at ease.

Commentary: The mind often plays tricks, surprising and shocking the meditator. If the student is not aware of these mind-plays, mindfulness will be weakened or lost.

- g. Hallucinations may distract the meditator.
- h. The rising and falling of the abdomen occurs together with its acknowledgment.
- i. The body may suddenly jump as though frightened, falling forwards or backwards.

Commentary: This occurrence is similar to the whirling of an electric fan. When the plug is pulled, the blades stop suddenly. Similarly, when the meditator is practicing energetically the mind wants to rest, wants to stop and "sleep." Consciousness "pulls the plug." The body's jumping response is a disruption of consciousness.

- j. The meditator realizes that existence in this life, and in all subsequent lives, is nothing more than mental and physical processes and a continual round of cause-and-effect relationships.
- k. The rising of the abdomen is divided into two stages: the beginning of rising and the ending of rising.

III. Knowledge of Mental and Physical Processes as Unsatisfactory and Nonself

- a. The meditator regards mind-body processes appearing through the five sense-doors as having the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonselfness.
- b. The meditator notices that the abdominal movement on rising consists of three sections: originating, continuing and disappearing.
- c. The student notices that the abdominal movement on falling consists of three sections: originating, continuing and disappearing.

Commentary: Acknowledgment means that the act of focusing the attention on the abdominal movement is going well.

- d. Many disturbances appear in consciousness. These mental images (nimitta) disappear slowly, after seven or eight acknowledgments.

Commentary: The strength of mindfulness is being tested.

- e. There are many mental images which disappear slowly and gently.

- f. The rising and falling movements of the abdomen may seem to stop, either for a long or a short interval.
- g. The breathing may be fast, slow, smooth, irregular or obstructed.
- h. The mind may be confused or distracted. This condition demonstrates the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself.
- i. The meditator's hands or feet may flick, clench or twist.

Commentary: Spontaneous movement of the limbs is caused by loss of mindfulness. The mind tries to "frighten" the meditator into terminating vipassana practice.

- j. The Ten Imperfections of Insight (vipassana upakilesa) may appear.

Ten imperfections (or defilements) of insight appear at the third stage of insight. An inexperienced meditator will often be confused by the appearance of these so-called pseudo-Nirvanas. Though not in themselves obstacles, a meditator may almost imperceptibly cling to any one of these phenomena rather than mindfully noting the arising and vanishing phases of mental and physical objects in the present moment. Conceit or delight may arise, causing the meditator to believe that one of the supramundane paths has been realized.

It is necessary at this time to have the guidance of an experienced teacher. Failing that, solitary meditators need to familiarize themselves with the obstacles they may encounter during insight meditation practice.

We can better understand the ten imperfections of insight by becoming familiar with the four elemental qualities of matter and their manifestations:

- Extension (earth-element): hardness and softness
- Cohesion (water-element): fluidity and contraction
- Heat (fire-element): temperature (hotness and coldness)
- Motion (air-element): vibration, oscillation and pressure

These components are found in varying degrees in *all* material objects, including the human body. Insight meditation provides an

occasion in which to personally experience the subtle nature of mind and body processes.

The ten imperfections of insight are:

- i. Light or illumination
- ii. Rapturous joy and interest
- iii. Tranquility of mental factors and consciousness
- iv. Bliss or happiness
- v. Confidence, zeal and determination
- vi. Exertion and energy
- vii. Strong mindfulness
- viii. Knowledge
- ix. Equanimity and indifference
- x. Gratification and delight

i. Light or illumination

1. Light appears to the meditator, similar to the brightness of a firefly, flashlight, car or train headlight.
2. The whole room seems to be lit up, enabling the meditator to see his or her body.
3. Light is diffused, shining everywhere, as though the room had no walls.
4. Light arises as though one is seeing various places before one's eyes.
5. A bright light appears to the meditator. The meditator thinks a door has opened and may lift the hand to shut it. The eyes may open to see what caused the light.
6. A brightness occurs, as though seeing an aura around brilliantly colored flowers.
7. The meditator seems to peer out over several miles of sea.

8. Rays of light seem to issue from the head and heart areas.

9. Hallucinations arise, such as seeing frightful images.

Commentary: Brilliant light is generated from the mind and is a concomitant of insight.

ii. Rapturous joy and interest

Rapturous joy has five characteristics which may confuse the meditator, in that the mind cannot decide either to relinquish clinging or to keep to the path of mindfulness (by noting objects appearing-and-vanishing in the present moment). Each type of joy has qualities worth noting.

1. Minor rapture

- a. The meditator is aware of a white color.
- b. There is a sensation of coolness, heaviness and dizziness. The hair on the body stands on end.
- c. Tears flow and the scalp “creeps.”

2. Momentary rapture

- a. Flashes of light may be seen in the eyes.
- b. Sparks fly in the eyes, as if struck from flint.
- c. Nervous twitching arises, as though fish were nibbling at the body.
- d. Stiffness appears in the body.
- e. A feeling occurs, as though ants were crawling on the body.
- f. Heat or energy pulsations occur all over the body.

Commentary: The above conditions occur due to the fire element in the body.

- g. The meditator experiences heart palpitations.
- h. The meditator can see various red colors.

Commentary: Sometimes the meditator can "see" the red color of the blood circulating in the body.

- i. The hair stands on end frequently, but is not accompanied by an intense sensation.
- j. Itching occurs, as though ants were scrambling up the face and body.

Commentary: Rapture is born in the mind. It is not a sensation or feeling in the normal sense, but may be characterized as zest or enthusiasm. Mindfulness then joins with concentration. Various types of sublime joy may arise, sometimes startling the meditator, who may think a rarefied state of meditation has been reached. A meditator may leave practice if these phenomena are not mindfully noted and dismissed.

3. Showering happiness

- a. The body may rock, clench, shake or tremble.

Commentary: The mind "plays" with the body like a toy, making it light.

- b. The face, hands and feet may twitch.
- c. The meditator may experience shaking up and down, as though a bed is being overturned.
- d. Nausea may appear; at times, vomiting occurs.

Commentary: This is the mind's manner of internally cleansing the body.

- e. A feeling appears similar to waves beating against the shore.
- f. A sensation occurs as though being touched by ripples or energy streams.
- g. One's body may tremble like a stick which is fixed in a flowing stream.

- h. Sometimes the meditator may see a light yellow color.

Commentary: A yellow color may appear to a meditator because of an attraction to shiny or gold-colored objects.

4. Uplifting joy

- a. So powerful is this rapture that one's body moves upwards, feels light and may float in the air.
- b. A feeling arises as though lice were climbing on the face and body.
- c. Diarrhea may occur.
- d. The body may bend forwards or backwards.

Commentary: At this time, energy is stronger than rapture.

- e. One feels pushed. Numbness occurs in different parts of the body when sitting or walking.
- f. One feels as if one's head were being twisted backwards and forwards.
- g. The mouth chews, opens and closes, or the lips purse.
- h. The body sways like a tree being blown by the wind.
- i. The body bends downwards and may fall down.
- j. The body may experience jumping movements.
- k. The arms and legs may fidget, or be raised and twitch.
- l. The body may thrust itself forwards or backwards or may recline.
- m. A silvery-gray color may appear to the meditator.

5. Pervading or rapturous happiness

- a. A sensation of coldness spreads throughout the body.
- b. Peace sets in from time to time.
- c. Itchy feelings occur over the body.
- d. Drowsiness appears; there is no wish to open the eyes.
- e. One has no desire to move the body.
- f. A chilling or flushing sensation appears from head to toe, or vice-versa.
- g. The body is cool, as though taking a bath or touching ice.
- h. One sees a blue or emerald-green color.
- i. An itchy feeling occurs, as though ants were crawling on the face.

Commentary: The presence of any of these phenomena may surprise or upset the meditator, causing mindfulness to weaken or vanish completely. Some meditators may even leave the practice at this point.

This concludes the five kinds of rapturous joy (the second imperfection of insight).

iii. Tranquility of mental factors and consciousness

1. A state of peace and quiet prevails similar to the realization of insight.
2. There is no annoyance or restlessness in the mind.
3. Acknowledgment of objects is convenient and smooth.
4. The body is comfortably cool. There is no desire to fidget.
5. Satisfaction arises with the activity of acknowledgment.

6. The meditator's feeling subsides, similar to falling asleep.

Commentary: Calmness can be a source of defilement because the mind is too relaxed and is "sleeping" inside. A meditator may be content with peacefulness and wish to remain in this state.

7. All actions are light and seem correct. Mindfulness while walking is soft and gentle.
8. Concentration is keen. There is no forgetfulness.
9. Thoughts are quite clear.
10. One who has a harsh and angry temperament will realize the Dhamma is profound. He or she will resolve to replace bad actions with good deeds and will try to abandon heedless conduct.

iv. Bliss or happiness

1. The meditator feels very comfortable.
2. Enjoyment and pleasure appear in the practice. The student wishes to meditate for a long time.

Commentary: Subtle forms of clinging appear at this time.

3. The desire arises to speak of results which have been gained.

Commentary: Conceit and pride arise in the meditator's practice.

4. The meditator cannot suppress a feeling of gladness.
5. The meditator will say he has never known such bliss.

Commentary: A meditator's strong emotions lead to a weakening of mindfulness, resulting in an inability to focus on phenomena appearing in the present moment.

6. The meditator often thinks of the virtue of his teacher and is grateful.

7. The meditator feels that the teacher is ready to help at all times.

Commentary: Refer to the commentary in 2 and 5 above.

v. Confidence, zeal, and determination

1. Confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is exaggerated.
2. The meditator wishes to encourage others to enter vipassana practice.
3. The meditator desires to remain at a meditation center for a long time.
4. The meditator wishes to repay the kindness of the meditation center.
5. The meditator wishes to proceed quickly and deepen the practice.
6. The meditator desires to perform meritorious deeds, make donations, and assist in building meditation centers.
7. The meditator thinks of the virtues of the person who persuaded him to enter practice.
8. The desire arises to offer gifts to the teacher, or the meditator may wish to ordain.
9. The meditator may make the decision to practice to completion.
10. The meditator may wish to go to a secluded place.
11. The meditator may wish to make only intensive efforts in training.

Commentary: Since the only duty of the meditator during an intensive retreat is to focus accurately on the phenomena appearing and vanishing in consciousness, it is not appropriate at this time to make plans, express gratitude, etc.

vi. Exertion and energy

1. A meditator may expend more effort than is necessary to do the work of just "knowing," i.e., watching objects arise-and-vanish in the present moment.

Commentary: Overexertion is like a heavy stone placed on grass. Wisdom cannot arise with the application of excessive effort. Intense effort causes clinging and impedes progress in the training.

2. One has the intention to practice sincerely and devotedly even unto death.
3. The meditator's practice is charged with excess energy.

Commentary: Mindfulness becomes scattered, causing a decrease in concentration.

vii. Strong mindfulness

1. Excess mindfulness causes the meditator to abandon acknowledgment of the present and to think of the past and the future.

Commentary: Intense mindfulness can see objects appearing-and-disappearing rapidly. The meditator loses interest in remaining in the present. Phenomena appear to "melt" swiftly into the past, as though looking at a line of quickly-moving trains.

2. The meditator clearly remembers and is overly concerned with incidents which occurred in the past.
3. The meditator seems to be able to recall past lives.

Commentary: Mindfulness is strong at this time, but it is linked with defilement. No wisdom is present, since mindfulness has not arisen with insight-knowledge. The "seeing" of past lives is not really true; it is a kind of thinking with images. The Buddha saw past births with wisdom, and he did not cling to this knowledge.

viii. Knowledge

1. Theoretical knowledge is confused with actual practice. If a misunderstanding occurs, the meditator maintains that only his views are correct. A tendency predominates to display one's learning and dispute with the teacher.

Commentary: The meditator clings to his own opinions at this stage. No mindfulness of the present moment occurs, due to excess thinking.

2. A meditator may erroneously divide the object, saying that the rising of the abdomen is "arising," and the falling of the abdomen is "ceasing."
3. The meditator reflects on principles previously studied about religion, philosophy, etc.

Commentary: The meditator reflects on mundane knowledge, but it is not insight-wisdom.

4. The practitioner is busy thinking and believes some aspect of wisdom has been realized. Awareness of the present moment is abandoned.

Commentary: The meditator constructs knowledge based on thought-processes. But insight-knowledge is not based on thinking, or on thinking about insight.

ix. Equanimity and indifference

1. The meditator's mind is silent and is neither pleased nor displeased. Awareness of the arising-and-vanishing of phenomena is indistinct and sometimes imperceptible. The student is forgetful.

Commentary: Equanimity is too strong and wisdom cannot arise. Even though disinterest is present, the meditator can acknowledge objects occasionally, but his precision is vague.

2. At times one is absent-minded and unable to think of anything in particular.

3. The mind is just peaceful and not curious about objects.
4. The meditator is indifferent to pursuing practice and does not seek progress in insight. The mind is peaceful and undisturbed.

Commentary: Equanimity is too concentrated. The student may believe that he has reached realization or finished the training.

5. The meditator pays no attention to bodily needs.
6. Consciousness is unaffected when observing so-called good or bad mental objects. Mindful awareness is disregarded, and more attention is focused on external objects.

Commentary: Mindfulness is weak. Indifference is stronger and covers the mind.

x. Gratification and delight

1. There is satisfaction in acknowledging various objects.

Commentary: Deep delight occurs about "knowing." Excess calmness appears and mindfulness does not remain in the present.

2. The meditator is satisfied with the appearance of rapture, happiness, confidence, exertion, knowledge and equanimity.

Commentary: The occurrence of deep satisfaction concerning the arising of various mental states is oftentimes a basis for clinging. It is a great danger to the meditator. Delight appearing in training, which runs unchecked, can indefinitely halt a meditator's progress.

3. One is satisfied with the appearance of mental images or "signs" occurring in consciousness.

Commentary: A meditator may experience a certain type of "internal fire" or mental "warmth" associated

with satisfaction concerning practice. "Thermos-bottle" syndrome appears: the external appearance is calm and placid, but there is heat inside.

That concludes the ten imperfections of insight.

IV. Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away

After successfully overcoming the imperfections of insight, the meditator commences pure or unmixed vipassana practice at the fourth stage of insight-knowledge.

Commentary: Concentration and mindfulness fluctuate back and forth until reaching this plateau (according to the organized method of practice).

- a. The meditator observes that the rising and falling of the abdomen consists of two, three, four, five or six stages.

Commentary: This is the first time mindfulness has sufficient strength to observe the arising and vanishing of mentality-and-materiality clearly. The insight meditator can now focus well on objects. It is similar to looking at white paper and seeing it as definitely clearly white, white-white and not dimly white.

- b. The rising-and-passing away of abdominal movements disappears by stages.

Commentary: The meditator is able to accurately separate phenomena appearing-and-disappearing. The abdominal movements are very clear and the noting of objects natural. Mindfulness stays on the mark (in the present moment).

- c. Various disturbances disappear after two or three acknowledgments.

Commentary: As a natural condition, mindfulness is precise now. Awareness of objects arising and vanishing in consciousness is balanced.

- d. Acknowledgment of objects is clear and comfortable.

Commentary: No excessive effort is expended in focusing attention. Awareness is well established and balanced.

- e. Mental images or "signs" disappear with two or three acknowledgments, such as "seeing, seeing."

- f. A clear bright light appears, similar to an electric light.

Commentary: The light is stronger than candlelight. This appearance of light is not a hallucination.

- g. The beginning and ending of the rising and falling abdominal movements are clearly perceived.

Commentary: Noting objects is natural and precise. No strain is present.

- h. While sitting, the body may bend forwards or backwards as though falling asleep. Some meditators drop heavily or lightly depending on their level of concentration. One seems tired but, in fact, concentration is good. This is called the “breaking of continuity” (*santati*) of the groups of existence, having the characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself.

- i. The rising and falling abdominal movement becomes quick and comes to a stop. This is the mark of impermanence. Nonself and unsatisfactoriness still continue.
- ii. The rising and falling abdominal movements become light and even and come to a stop. This is the mark of nonself. Impermanence and unsatisfactoriness still continue.
- iii. The rising and falling abdominal movements become stiff and obstructed and come to a stop. This is the mark of unsatisfactoriness. Impermanence and nonself continue.

Commentary: “Santati” means continuity. As a result of the continual observation of objects appearing and vanishing, concentration joins with mindfulness to reveal the truth of impermanence. In insight meditation, we can say that mindfulness wants to “know” the truth. Santati is similar to an electric fan beginning to whirl and gaining momentum with every revolution until it reaches maximum speed. Concentration controls the switch and can “pull the plug.”

The truth of impermanence differs from the observation of changing worldly conditions. With the former, the meditator can see that all conditions in the world are subject to flux, including mindfulness itself. When the sense of continuity is interrupted, mindfulness understands itself to vanish as well.

Only a Buddha or an arahant has mindfulness continually and naturally. It is mindfulness of the characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself. The Buddhas and arahants are free from the conditions of mental confusion and clinging.

- i. Those with good concentration will experience ceasing at frequent intervals, as though falling into an abyss or going through an air pocket. The body, however, remains still and does not drop.

V. Knowledge of the Dissolution (Ceasing) of Formations

- a. The end of the rising movement and the end of the falling movement are clear.

Commentary: Insight sees the passing away or dying of phenomena clearly. Until this insight-knowledge arises, the average person does not know there is "dying" of physical and mental processes all the time, in the present moment. This realization may make the meditator feel quite dejected for a time, but eventually the sadness disappears if the meditator does not cling to this condition. At this stage the meditator begins to deeply understand the Buddhist teaching of the cessation of phenomena. The quality of the practice and the meditator's background determine when such insight-knowledge will be born.

- b. Awareness of rising and falling is vague.

Commentary: The meditator has disturbing feelings and becomes irritated easily. Attention weakens since these feelings are stronger than mindfulness. Knowledge regarding cessation is painful to the mind and makes objects unclear. The mind may become very silent now.

- c. Rising and falling disappear when acknowledging them precisely, so one must acknowledge instead, "knowing, knowing."

Commentary: Attention is centered precisely on the present instant. There is total focusing. It is similar to watching heavy rain falling and noting the drops immediately disappearing into the soft earth.

- d. It seems that one is not acknowledging anything.

Commentary: This aspect of clarity varies with each meditator, depending on how fast or slow mindfulness focuses on objects.

- e. When observing rising and falling, the mind of the knower seems to disappear. The meditator will note that form disappears first, followed by the waning of mental states. When the mind vanishes first, the mind follows as acknowledgment of its disappearance.

- f. The rising and falling away of phenomena may seem distant and faint.

Commentary: Mindfulness is so sharp now that the meditator may feel that awareness emanates from the "past" due to the swift accuracy of noting the flux of mind-and-matter.

- g. A feeling of "tightness" is pronounced. One is unable to see the continuity of rising and falling. "Mind" disappears and a second mind follows as acknowledgment.

- h. Acknowledgment is indistinct. Mental and physical objects seem magnified in strength.

Commentary: Sometimes the mind may try to "shake" or disturb mindfulness by making phenomena appear very intense.

- i. At times, only rising and falling occurs and the meditator's "self" seems to disappear.

Commentary: Since there is no clinging to the objects arising and vanishing, the "self" cannot be found. When the mind disappears, there is momentary "emptiness." What knows "emptiness"? Insight knows "emptiness." Why doesn't insight disappear? This insight is a special understanding which arises and enables the meditator to know the flux of objects in consciousness.

- j. A feeling of warmth passes over the body.

Commentary: Warmth or heat comes from the exertion of the mind. It is like a fire burning away the mind's defilements or impurities.

- k. Insensitivity occurs, as though one were covered with a net.

Commentary: The phenomenal world of birth and death is like a net which covers the defilements. This "net" keeps the defilements intact.

1. The mind, and its objects, seem to disappear together.

Commentary: When mindfulness becomes keener, mind objects appear and disappear in quick succession.

- m. At first, form vanished while the mind remained; now, however, the object disappears and consciousness disappears as well.

Commentary: Mind is clinging, but when the object disappears the mind cannot remain alone, so the mind disappears as well.

- n. A meditator may find that rising and falling cease for a brief span of time or as long as two to four days until boredom occurs. The teacher must awaken the mind of the meditator by suggesting more physical activity.

Commentary: Mindfulness does not wish to "see" objects disappearing all the time. At this stage, mindfulness is joined with concentration to control feelings. No other feelings can arise until boredom appears. When training continues, the meditator may see this aspect of practice precisely for a number of days. Then practice takes on the characteristic of boredom.

At this stage, the meditator should not sit for extended periods of time but, rather, be more active to lose an excess of concentration as well as the emotion of boredom. Boredom is not helpful at this time and skillful means should be found to correct the situation. If just noting "boredom, boredom" does not dissipate it, then the meditator should either walk more often or perform another appropriate activity.

- o. Awareness of the coming into being, peaking and ceasing moments is present, but interest is not focused. The meditator observes only the ceasing of mental and physical processes.

Commentary: It is important for the meditator to be more aware of the waning or ceasing moments, rather than the arising and peaking of phenomenal events. The ceasing demonstrates the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself. Why do mental and physical states arise? They arise only to die.

- p. Mindfulness of internal objects (the rising and falling of the abdomen) is unclear. External objects, such as the standing or sitting posture, trees, etc., all seem to vibrate.

Commentary: External objects are relatively simple to acknowledge; objects of the mind are deep, subtle, and difficult to observe.

The mind together with form can sometimes see objects "vibrating" — e.g., hot air streams all arise and vanish, but the meditator can only see the vanishing or vibration aspect (dissolution).

- q. The meditator sees all objects as though looking at a field in foggy weather. Everything is vague and obscure.

Commentary: Refer to the commentary on "p" above.

- r. When looking at the sky, it seems that the air vibrates.

Commentary: Refer to the commentary on "p" above.

- s. Rising and falling away suddenly vanish and then suddenly reappear.

VI. Knowledge of the Fearful Nature of Mental and Physical States

- a. Initially, there is an acknowledgment of objects, but now awareness vanishes together with consciousness.

Commentary: When attention is given to objects as they arise and vanish, the mind remains in the present moment. When one object disappears, consciousness falls away immediately. When mind arises again, consciousness is, in a sense, "surprised." The meditator experiences fear, for no one wishes to see mental and physical phenomena arising and vanishing continuously. The self-concept desires protection and wishes to continue. Hence, fear arises in the meditator's mind.

- b. Fear is present, but it is unlike fear connected with supernatural occurrences.

Commentary: A peculiar type of fear appears during insight meditation practice to test the meditator's endurance; that is, to see if he can maintain mindfulness of the present moment.

Sometimes the fear produced is similar to a horse being surprised by a wild animal. The horse feels fright and quakes with fear.

- c. The meditator is fearful when continually observing mental and physical states disappearing and fading into "nothingness."
- d. The meditator may experience neuralgic pains. Even while walking or standing still, pain may appear in the body.

Commentary: When fear arises in consciousness, mindfulness cannot swiftly focus on the flux of phenomena. The appearance of bodily pain is a test of mindfulness.

- e. Some meditators think of their friends and relatives and weep.

Commentary: The meditator feels utterly alone in the world and clings to the thought of a spouse, parents, relatives and friends.

- f. The meditator may experience a peculiar fear projected onto whatever is seen, even a cup or a table.

Commentary: The meditator feels that no person or situation in the world can be of any help. When the mind experiences this special kind of fear, the meditator is afraid of everything in the world, no matter how harmless its appearance. Experiences such as hearing, seeing, etc., take on a fearful aspect, seemingly with no reason.

- g. The meditator formerly thought certain mental and physical states were desirable. Now he realizes that body-mind processes are insubstantial and unreliable.

Commentary: This realization is a natural development in the arising of insight.

- h. The practitioner cannot find enjoyment in any physical or mental state.

Commentary: Nothing can make the meditator's mind feel pleased. Sadness prevails, but it is not the sorrow associated with worldly events.

- i. The meditator realizes he is afraid, but feels it is not real fear, and is not controlled by the emotion.

Commentary: Refer to the commentary on "g" and "h" above.

VII. Knowledge of Mental and Physical States as Unsatisfactory

- a. The rising and falling abdominal movements disappear by stages. Their appearance is unclear and the movements gradually vanish.

Commentary: The mind can actually "see" itself being born and also dying, moment-to-moment. A vague sense of boredom sets in. One feels tired and uneasy. Mindfulness sees that, indeed, there is reason to be afraid. More often than not, the defilements control the mind and are constantly being born.

- b. Life seems bad, ugly and tiresome. The meditator experiences irritable feelings.
- c. Mental and physical states appear quickly to the mind and acknowledgment is keen.

Commentary: Mindfulness suddenly increases now and focusing is quite clear. This stage is similar to seeing water falling into a pond, drop by drop, the bubbles breaking again and again. The bubbles are empty and break into nothingness. This demonstrates the truths of impermanence and nonself.

- d. There seems to be nothing but bad life situations. Everything in the world seems dark and generates pain due to the incessant arising and vanishing of phenomena.
- e. In contrast to the earlier days of practice, one cannot acknowledge well what is perceived by way of ear, eye, nose, tongue, body and mind.

Commentary: The meditator is thoroughly bored and becomes lazy in acknowledging objects. Only dryness and a deep sense of the insipid nature of life prevails. There is no "taste" for anything at all in life.

VIII. Knowledge of Disenchantment

- a. All objects are wearisome and unattractive.
- b. The meditator experiences dryness, as though lazy, but the ability to acknowledge well is still present.

Commentary: The feeling of boredom is very intense. It seems that all events in the world end in disappointment due to the relentless birth and death of phenomena. The meditator becomes dull and

does not wish to continue practicing. When the awareness of mental and physical phenomena arises, however, mindfulness is clear.

- c. The meditator is joyless and feels bored and sorrowful, as though separated from loved ones and every desirable experience.

Commentary: There is no clinging at this stage. One waits for the feeling to wane; however, it does not disappear.

- d. Previously one heard people complain about ordinary boredom. Now one really knows another kind of overwhelming boredom through direct, personal experience.

Commentary: Talking or thinking about ordinary boredom and then experiencing this intense boredom is an entirely different matter. This is a special type of boredom which only arises during insight meditation.

- e. Formerly one may have thought that only hell was sorrowful and that heaven and the human worlds were desirable. At this stage, however, the meditator only wishes to escape from birth and death. Nibbana (Nirvana) is seen as the only total release.

Commentary: When boredom intensifies, the meditator does not think about heaven or hell. Nothing can make the mind feel pleasant at this stage. The mind begins to bend towards the search for freedom.

- f. There is acknowledgment that mental and bodily states are unpleasant and undesirable.

- g. The meditator feels that every situation in the world is oppressive and no true enjoyment is to be found anywhere.

Commentary: The meditator may wish to go to an isolated place and continue practice. There is a realization, however, that wherever one goes the five senses and the mind will follow.

- h. The meditator does not wish to meet or speak with anyone, but only desires to remain in his room.

Commentary: This is a subtle form of clinging. There is no real boredom now, only quietude.

- i. The meditator feels dry, as though living in the middle of a parched field in which all the grass has been burned by the heat of the sun.

Commentary: A sense of utter desolation sets in.

- j. The meditator feels lonely, dejected and apathetic.
- k. Some meditators realize that fame and fortune, which formerly were viewed as desirable, have neither real stability nor true joy, and that nothing in the world is lasting and should be grasped. One becomes bored and does not seek happiness where there is birth, old age, sickness and death. Thus deep and intense boredom arises, along with nonattachment. The mind is bent on the search for the total freedom of Nibbana.

IX. Knowledge of the Desire to Abandon the Worldly State

- a. The body itches as though being bitten all over by ants. It seems that small creatures are climbing up one's face and body.

Commentary: The mind is playing tricks again. When the meditator is bored, it is relatively easy to be patient. When the body itches, however, impatience occurs. The meditator may wish to stop practicing, thinking that a better meditation center exists at another location. It is similar to an animal fleeing from place to place, thinking that somewhere else will be a better place to rest.

- b. The meditator is impatient and rushes to complete every activity. Acknowledgment while standing, sitting, lying down or walking is vague.

Commentary: Restlessness increases now and mindfulness is low. The mind wants to leave this unhappy situation, but now is not the time.

- c. One cannot acknowledge even small actions.

Commentary: It may appear to the meditator that mindfulness is weak, but actually it is a sign of progress in insight.

- d. The mind is uneasy, restless and bored.
- e. The meditator wishes to escape and leave meditation practice.

Commentary: Unsatisfactoriness is more acute at this time. A strong urge to retreat from noticing objects is present. This type of frustration is sharper and deeper than boredom.

- f. The meditator may think of returning home, believing he has meager abilities for meditation practice. In earlier times in Asia this was called the “rolling the mat” stage.

Commentary: Pondering the situation and thereby lowering mindfulness of the present moment, one plans for the future but is still indecisive.

X. Knowledge Which Investigates the Path to Deliverance and Which Instills a Decision to Practice Further

- a. The meditator experiences a jabbing sensation throughout the body, as though splinters were piercing the skin.

Commentary: The meditator may experience sensations of intense pain, as though the body were being slashed with a knife. This condition arises during practice to test the mindfulness and endurance of the meditator. The meditator can see precisely how sensations, etc. arise and vanish.

- b. Many disturbing sensations arise, but disappear after two or three acknowledgments.

Commentary: Again, a test of mindfulness arises to determine whether or not distractions or disturbances vanish from the meditator's consciousness.

The meditator feels drowsy.

- c. *Commentary: Sleepiness will disappear if mindfulness has sufficient power to disperse drowsiness.*

- d. The body may become stiff, similar to entering a state of absorption. The mind is still active, and hearing continues to function.

Commentary: The meditator has been working diligently and the mind wishes to rest. It has been a witness to the arising and dying of phenomena day and night. The mind combines with concentration to “stop” everything, and consciousness becomes sleepy.

- e. A tingling, heavy feeling arises, as though a stone were placed on top of the body.

Commentary: The mind feels that the five groups of clinging (form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness) are heavy. The body is too weighted down to move, and the mind wants to throw the body away.

- f. The meditator feels heat spreading throughout the body.

Commentary: Defilements "know" when the meditator has reached this stage of insight-knowledge. These afflictions are like fire, making the body uncomfortable. The desire to abandon these impurities is strong.

- g. The meditator may feel very uncomfortable.

XI. Knowledge Which Regards Mental and Physical Processes With Dispassion

- a. The meditator is not frightened or glad, but indifferent. Phenomenal existence is experienced as merely a continuous round of arising and vanishing. Abdominal movements are regarded as merely mental and physical processes.

Commentary: Mindfulness is focused naturally and no anxiety or need to hurry arises. If the meditator practices to this level, perfections of character cultivated in the past come to assist him. Like preparing to leap a hurdle in a contest, the meditator prepares to "jump," garnering enough confidence, strength and power to make the leap to freedom.

- b. The meditator is neither happy nor sad. Mindfulness is present and consciousness is clear in acknowledging mind and body processes.

Commentary: The meditator realizes that immature ideas of happiness are gone. Life appears quite ordinary now and no special excitement is present. Phenomena simply arise and fall away. There is no clinging to past occurrences.

- c. Memory is clear and acknowledgment occurs without difficulty.

Commentary: Remembering some event which occurred in the past is easy, but there is no clinging to the experience. Mindfulness, which no longer needs to be followed step by step, is sharp. The meditator can still be mindful and quite relaxed. There is no sense

of "practice." Mindfulness will be kept naturally now, following the flow of phenomena.

- d. Good concentration arises and mindfulness remains peaceful and smooth for a long time, like a fine car running on a smooth road. The meditator feels satisfied and may forget the time.

Commentary: Mindfulness is relaxed and balanced and practice is convenient. When a meditator forgets the passage of time, equanimity has arisen. The duration of this condition depends on the quality and strength of mindful awareness.

- e. Concentration becomes extremely refined, somewhat like dough being kneaded by a skilled baker. There is no uneasiness of mind and the meditator is not disturbed by sounds, sights, etc.

Commentary: Practice is smooth, easy and balanced.

- f. Various pains and diseases may be healed, such as certain kinds of paralysis or nervous disorders.

Commentary: At this stage, certain psychosomatic diseases may be cured or eased.

The meditator notes all phenomena as continuously disappearing. The desire for happiness and aversion toward suffering are gone. Only equanimity is present. Mindfulness is now strong and precise. Even when mindfulness focuses on a pleasant feeling, the mind does not cling. Similarly, when consciousness focuses on frustration or pain, no grasping arises and, therefore, mental disturbance is not born. This stage of insight-knowledge is joined with equanimity at all times.

- g. During this stage of practice, the meditator feels at ease, and acknowledgment is easy. Feeling satisfied, the meditator may forget the passage of time. Planning to sit for half an hour, he may sit for a full hour.

Commentary: The duration of this condition depends on the strength of moment-to-moment concentration. If the person has practiced concentration meditation previously, it is possible for him to sit uninterrupted anywhere from two to twenty hours.

XII. Knowledge Which Conforms to the Four Noble Truths, Prepares Entry to the Path, Attains the Fruit of the Path, and Approaches Nibbana by Way of Either Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness or Nonself

Arrival at this stage of insight-knowledge means that realization appears in progressive stages, in the following order:

- a. Progression follows the earlier levels of insight beginning with the 4th stage until the 12th stage is reached.

Commentary: Until this level is realized, insight meditation practice is like the flight of birds, flying sometimes higher or lower. Restlessness lowers the level of insight. At this stage, it is difficult for the meditator to focus accurately on the “appearing and vanishing” aspect of phenomena. One may feel lazy or just “bad.” The meditator must know clearly and be absolutely certain of his experience. He must be clearly aware if happiness or unhappiness is present or not. When the mind is sure of its experience, there is no craving, clinging or anxiety about any situation in the world.

- b. Progression follows the higher stages of insight — that is, the 37 factors of enlightenment.

The 37 factors of enlightenment arise simultaneously with insight-knowledge.

- i. Impermanence

The meditator who has mainly practiced charity and kept the precepts will enter the path to liberation by way of realizing impermanence.

Commentary: Usually, ordinary people perform charitable acts with some degree of clinging for rewards in the present or future. When insight-knowledge dawns, there is no clinging to such acts. During meditation practice the mind does not cling, since mindfulness is following the abdominal movements or other objects quickly, and no opportunity for attachment arises.

The rising and falling abdominal movements will become quick but suddenly cease. The meditator is aware of the cessation of the movement as the abdomen rises and falls, or

the cessation of sensation when sitting and touching [“sitting and touching” is a vipassana exercise in which a meditator alternates between focusing on the sitting posture and a designated spot on the body]. Quick breathing signifies impermanence. The meditator must have no doubt about this occurrence. He must clearly know its presence, rather than merely thinking about or imagining the experience.

ii. Unsatisfactoriness

The meditator who has previously practiced concentration meditation will realize insight-wisdom by way of the perception of unsatisfactoriness.

Commentary: Often practitioners of concentration meditation will cling to states of tranquility. Every meditator, until practicing insight meditation, desires states of deep, peaceful concentration. This situation is common to all meditators, and was even experienced by the Buddha in his practice before his enlightenment.

When meditators can see all mental and physical phenomena as continuously in a state of flux, from moment to moment, no clinging to states of calmness can exist. Meditators will realize the unsatisfactory nature of tranquility states. No longer will they seek "happiness" based on worldly phenomena, which are subject to change and destruction. Now they can truly begin to see the nature of life. This new attitude is not a feeling, but a permanent realization.

When the meditator continues to mindfully acknowledge objects, the cessation of sensation will occur with the abdominal movement, or with the sitting and touching objects.

iii. Nonself

The meditator who has practiced insight meditation previously, or who has been interested in this practice in the past, will attain realization by way of nonself. The meaning of nonself is that phenomena are without substance, void and uncontrollable.

In meditation practice, the rising and falling movements of the abdomen become steady and evenly-spaced, and then cessation occurs. The meditator will clearly see cessation, either with the rising and falling movements, or with the sitting and touching objects.

Commentary: The realization of nonself is a profound teaching, more subtle to perceive than the truths of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. Usually most meditators can only understand that phenomena arise and vanish incessantly, which signifies impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. It is more difficult to realize nonself or "emptiness." The intuitive realization of nonself occurs by a subtle "just knowing."

c. The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are clearly and distinctly penetrated in the twelfth stage of insight-wisdom.

i. Birth of mentality and materiality

This truth is evident when the abdomen begins to rise or begins to fall, and occurs when the meditator is about to enter the thirteenth stage of insight (the transitional stage from the worldly condition to a "noble" or "matured one" [this stage is said to last only a fraction of a second — only as long as the duration of a single mind-moment]). It is called the realization of the origin of mental and physical processes. It is the point of origination of both the beginning of the rising and the beginning of the falling movements of the abdomen.

ii. The truth of unsatisfactoriness

This truth is perceived when the rising and falling movements of the abdomen can no longer be tolerated because one is aware of their unsatisfactory nature. One knows that all things in the world need to die and come to an end. Death is the extinction, the breaking up of mental and physical processes. Aging heralds the deterioration process of mind-and-matter. The moments when form begins to arise and when form begins to vanish are themselves said to

be "the arising of arising and vanishing." the perception of the cessation of unsatisfactoriness is the realization of this truth.

- iii. The cessation of unsatisfactoriness and the cessation of mentality-and-materiality

This truth is seen when the rising and falling movements disappear simultaneously. Birth is the limit of knowledge and so the mental acknowledgment of the cessation of the movements of the abdomen also fades away at the same time. This is the realization when unsatisfactoriness and the point of origination of mentality-and-materiality both cease.

- iv. The great truth

In this state of wisdom, one is completely aware of the rising and falling of the abdomen. One is aware of the beginning of the rising and falling, the middle of the rising and falling, and the point when the rising and falling cease.

When the ending of unsatisfactoriness and the cessation of the movements of the abdomen are clearly seen, then this truth is realized.

It is necessary for the practitioner to be aware of these four truths simultaneously. It should be like the blowing out of a candle.

- It should be like the point at which the wick of the candle has been used up.
- It should be like the point at which the wax of the candle has been used up.
- It should be like an overwhelming brilliance which has obliterated the candle light.

The four characteristics of the light given here are likely to appear at the same time and at the same level as the perception of the Four Noble Truths. The realization of Nibbana is perceived in all of the Four Noble Truths at the same time.

Commentary: The death of mental-and-physical states occurs in the present moment and appears very quickly. It cannot be seen by the eye or be known by ordinary conceptual thinking. It can only be known intuitively. The meditator's capabilities are the

determining factors in the arising or non-arising of insight-wisdom.

When insight-knowledge sees mental and physical states arising and disappearing, the mind knows the ending of these states. The mind will definitely abandon certain defilements, and they will not arise again. This is the first time that insight-knowledge can see Nibbana clearly.

In vipassana training, the word "path" means practice. If insight meditation is correctly developed from the beginning, with the student focusing on mentality and materiality correctly until he can see their flux clearly in the present moment, as well as seeing the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself, then these three characteristics of existence are fully comprehended and practice is coming to an end.

XIII. Knowledge of Deliverance From the Worldly Condition

This is the first stage of insight-wisdom which separates one from the worldly condition. Mental and physical states, together with the mind which cognizes them, become peaceful and quiet. The mind comes into the vicinity of Nibbana and takes Nibbana as its object. This state is between mundane and supramundane existence. When feeling begins to break off, this stage of insight has been experienced.

Commentary: There is a "change of lineage" in the sense that a profound realization of Truth has manifested. Though one does not realize Nibbana yet, the meditator sees Nibbana as object; that is, a "marker" has been placed on the road. The mind actually glimpses Nibbana. The desire to abandon the defilements arises and the mind is primed to accomplish this step. It is the making of a raft, as it were, to cross to the "other shore." The proper direction is known but one cannot completely abandon the unnecessary materials (defilements), though the dangerous and flammable cargo will necessarily have to be destroyed.

- a. This is the knowledge which covers the appearance of arising.

Commentary: A traveler on a raft, in the middle of a river, can view both banks clearly. Similarly, the meditator has no doubts about this realization. It does not depend upon the activity of the five senses. This knowledge is just known intuitively by the sixth sense, the mind.

- b. This is the knowledge which covers the continuance of mental and physical states.

Commentary: Knowledge regarding the continuity of mental-and-physical phenomena is similar to a chick inside an egg pecking its way out of the shell. The head appears first and the chick can have a partial view by moving around. Everything is clear, but it has not completely broken free of the shell. The chick pokes its head around from time to time. With sustained interest and exertion the shell will, at last, be completely broken and the chick set free.

- c. This is the knowledge which covers external mental and physical phenomena.

Commentary: The meditator truly knows the conditional nature of the external world, along with its potential for suffering. Knowing that suffering is inherent in all existence, compassion naturally arises for all sentient life. No matter what is experienced as seeing, hearing, etc., personal mental suffering does not arise for those who have realized this stage of insight-wisdom.

- d. This is the knowledge which moves towards cessation.

Commentary: When this level of insight-wisdom is realized, the meditator can correct wrong view concerning mental and physical phenomena. Some defilements are abandoned for 2-3 seconds. These defilements follow the meditator to the border of the new country, or to the bank of the "other shore."

- e. This is the knowledge which approaches discontinuity or cessation (Nibbana).

Commentary: The mental impurities are the prohibited materials which prevent us from realizing Nibbana or awakening. It is similar to reaching the border of another country while carrying prohibited articles. One will have to abandon the unacceptable materials, or turn back.

- f. This is the wisdom which covers arising and then approaches non-arising.

Commentary: While one is still crossing the river and sees the approach of the other shore, one prepares to disembark. The landing is imminent and there is no clinging to sights along the

way. Similarly, no grasping and arising of defilements occurs at this stage.

XIV. Knowledge by Which the Defilements Are Abandoned and Overcome by Destruction

The moment immediately following the breaking off of sensation is the arising of clear and complete knowledge of the path to Nibbana. It is the arising of the path itself.

Awareness of the stream of Nibbana lasts for a moment.

Certain defilements are overcome by destruction. This constitutes a cleansing and preparation for the destruction of the remaining mental taints.

The defilements which are destroyed are as follows:

- a. Personality belief in the existence of a permanent, unchanging self.
- b. Skeptical doubt about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the enlightened sangha, what is and is not the path, heaven and hell, the results of the path and Nibbana.
- c. The misunderstanding of rites, rituals and disciplines as a means, in themselves, of achieving purification.

This stage of insight-wisdom has Nibbana as its object. Nibbana can be reached in this very life. This is supramundane wisdom.

There is a deep knowledge of the Dhamma which is necessary to lead one to enlightenment. Profound wisdom is born, enabling the practitioner to "uproot" the defilements.

Commentary: Upon realizing this stage, one experiences a feeling of surprise. One is completely happy and at ease. No condition of worldly happiness can compare with this realization. The abandoning of the defilements is like a flash of lightning — and then the thunder.

XV. Knowledge Which Realizes the Fruit of the Path and Has Nibbana as Object

This stage of insight is the fruit of the path immediately following the moment in which the path is discovered. The mind has realized what has occurred and Nibbana is the object of the mind for two or three moments. There is no interim state. Supramundane knowledge continues to appear at this level of insight-wisdom.

Commentary: Lightning hitting a tree not only kills it, but also destroys its root system. Only the shell remains, never to grow again. Similarly, the mind receives knowledge about the defilements which have been destroyed, and sees "knowing" as its object for 2-3 moments.

A summary of the stages leading to the cessation of the defilements follows.

Stages leading to the cessation of the defilements:

- a. The first cessation of sensation appears in the 13th stage and has Nibbana as its object. It lies between mundane and supramundane existence.
- b. The midway cessation of sensation is the 14th stage and has Nibbana as its object. The first three defilements have been broken off. It is supramundane existence. At this point, certain defilements are eradicated for the stream-winner, the once-returner and the non-returner. For the arahant there is no reflection on the remaining defilements as he or she is free from them all.
- c. The final cessation is the 15th stage and it has Nibbana as its object. It is supramundane knowledge. *It is the complete eradication of defilements for the arahant.*

In this stage, mental taints are prevented from re-occurring. This process may be compared to extinguishing a fire. If a piece of wood is on fire, you have to throw water on the wood to put out the flame. The wood, however, continues to smolder. Dousing the wood two or three times with water will completely extinguish any remaining fire. This procedure parallels what happens when a meditator extinguishes the defilements at the 14th stage of insight. The defilements possess such power that it becomes necessary to purge them again during the 15th stage in order to finally put out the fire of mental impurities.

Commentary: One returns to normal consciousness for retrospection only. Everything is now in the past. At the same time, one knows intuitively what has occurred in the mind. This stage of insight-knowledge is similar to successfully passing a final examination. As soon as one receives the results, the mind will fully relax.

XVI. Knowledge Which Reviews the Defilements Still Remaining

At this stage, there is contemplation of the path, the fruit and Nibbana. This insight-knowledge consists of the consideration of those defilements still remaining in the mind:

- a. There is contemplation of having followed the path.
- b. There is contemplation of the fact that a result has been obtained.
- c. There is contemplation of the defilements which have been eradicated.
- d. There is contemplation of the defilements which remain (for the first, second and third levels of realization).
- e. There is contemplation of the fact that Nibbana, which is an exceptional state of awareness, has been glimpsed and experienced.

While the meditator is acknowledging rising and falling, he or she comes upon the path, the fruit and Nibbana. At that very moment, three conditions occur: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and nonself. When one is noting the rising and falling of the abdominal movements, one is aware of the total cessation of the rising and falling. After cessation, awareness resumes and one contemplates what has happened. After this moment, one continues to acknowledge the rising and falling movements, but they seem much clearer than normal.

Conclusion

The meditator may then wish to see the results of the path which has just been realized. There arises the wish to make the mind peaceful and quiet and not have to “feel the body” for a time, anywhere from five minutes up to seven days. Depending upon the level of concentration, a meditator may remain in this state for a long or a short period of time.

Summary

- The truth of impermanence is characterized by quick breathing.
- The truth of unsatisfactoriness is characterized by heavy, obstructed breathing.

- The truth of nonself is characterized by smooth, even breathing.
- Stages 12 through 16 of insight-wisdom arise concurrently, with no separation.
- The meditator will only have awareness of the 12th and the 16th levels.
- There is no awareness of levels 13 to 15 because of the cessation of sensation. The meditator is quiet, finished.
- Consciousness resumes at the 16th stage of insight-wisdom.

Chapter Eight: Final Comments

Before the Buddha taught others with assurance, he set about realizing his own enlightenment. We can try to help others as skillfully and selflessly as possible, but the only mind we can really be sure of influencing is our own. By earnestly cultivating our own minds we will spontaneously develop a more humane character imbued with genuine compassion.

At any given moment the practice of the Dhamma can reveal new options and a new freedom. If we see rightly, every situation is an opportunity to practice the teachings. If we have enemies, we should think of them as our special teachers. They will teach us patience, fortitude and loving-kindness. With the knowledge of mind-and-body processes we can transform our lives and view every experience according to the Dhamma.

This is applied Buddhism. It is the Dhamma in action. Every spiritual resource available to help us gain freedom should be searched out and put to the test.

The Dhamma does not offer an escape from life's responsibilities, nor does it foster aimless drifting. The entire Buddhist path emphasizes balance, commitment and sustained effort. As long as we live and function in the world we will never run out of opportunities to practice the Dhamma and mindfulness in daily life.

Many people talk about making skillful wholesome karma by following the Buddhist path. That is a very good thing to do. But it is much better to make no karma at all — that is, to completely give up our attachment to the body and mind, as well as our attachment to good deeds and their results. We should live as carefully today as if it were our last day on earth. When the Buddha was asked how long a person's life was, he answered: "As long as your next breath."

We will not reap the benefits of the Dhamma only by listening to talks, reading books, studying, writing articles, quoting the Buddha, or becoming a disciple of a famous teacher. Although these activities are commendable and wholesome, we still have to do the work of removing our mental impurities. It is our own experience which enslaves us; it is our own experience which will free us.

If we do the work of purifying our minds, we can then experience ultimate truth. There is a truth which reflects the phenomenal world of mentality-and-materiality. If we

carefully investigate this world of changing phenomenal states we will eventually realize the First Noble Truth of unsatisfactoriness. This is the truth of the world.

The truth which transcends the phenomenal world is liberation from unsatisfactoriness, or Nibbana. This is the truth that is not of this world. It is the fundamental reality.

We cannot predict when we will realize this ultimate truth. It really does not matter how much time it takes. As long as we move in the right direction we can be assured of reaching the destination.

Appendix:
The Vipassana Bhumi (Grounds for Establishing Insight)

I. The Five Groups of Clinging (Khandhas)

1. Form
2. Feeling
3. Perception
4. Mental formations
5. Consciousness

II. The Twelve Spheres

1. Eye sphere, form sphere
2. Ear sphere, sound sphere
3. Nose sphere, scent sphere
4. Tongue sphere, flavor sphere
5. Body sphere, tactile form sphere
6. Mind sphere, ideation sphere

III. The Eighteen Elements

1. Eye element
2. Visual form element
3. Eye-consciousness-element
4. Ear element
5. Sound element
6. Ear-consciousness-element
7. Nose element
8. Scent element
9. Nose-consciousness-element

10. Tongue element
11. Flavor element
12. Tongue-consciousness-element
13. Body element (tactile capacity)
14. Tactility element
15. Body-consciousness-element
16. Mind element
17. Ideation element
18. Mind-consciousness-element

IV. The Twenty-Two Faculties

1. Eye
2. Ear
3. Nose
4. Tongue
5. Body
6. Mind
7. Femininity
8. Masculinity
9. Life-force
10. Bodily pleasure
11. Bodily pain
12. Mental pleasure
13. Mental pain
14. Equanimity
15. Confidence
16. Effort
17. Mindfulness

18. Concentration
19. Wisdom
20. "I am knowing the unknowing"
21. Knowing
22. One who has full knowing

V. The Four Noble Truths

1. The truth of unsatisfactoriness.
2. The truth of the cause of unsatisfactoriness.
3. The truth of the cessation of unsatisfactoriness.
4. The truth of the path leading to the cessation of unsatisfactoriness.

VI. The Links of Dependent Origination

- Ignorance conditions volition.
- Volition conditions consciousness.
- Consciousness conditions mind and matter.
- Mind and matter condition sense impressions.
- Sense impressions condition contact.
- Contact conditions feeling.
- Feeling conditions craving.
- Craving conditions clinging.
- Clinging conditions becoming.
- Becoming conditions rebirth.
- Rebirth conditions old age, death, grief, sorrow and despair.

Glossary

Dependent Origination (paticca-samuppada): The *Buddhist Dictionary* states: “‘paticca-samuppada,’ dependent origination, is the doctrine of the conditionality of all physical and psychical phenomena, a doctrine which, together with that of impersonality (anatta), forms the indispensable condition for the real understanding and realization of the teaching of the Buddha. It shows the conditionality and dependent nature of that uninterrupted flux of manifold physical and psychical phenomena of existence conventionally called the ego, or man, or animal, etc.” For a list of the individual steps of dependent origination, see the section on the Vipassana Bhumi that follows the Glossary.

Five Aggregates or Groups of Clinging (Five Khandhas): Material form, feeling, perception, consciousness, and mental formations. These are the interdependent elements which form a temporary personality and constitute what we conventionally call an individual “person” or “being.” These five aggregates are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and nonself. A meditator who achieves penetrating insight clearly sees that no enduring self can be found in this collection of aggregates. In S. XXII, 49 we read: “Whatever there is of corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, whether past, present or future, one’s own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near, this one should understand according to reality and true wisdom: ‘This does not belong to me, this am I not, this is not my self.’”

1) *Form group*—In the five groups of clinging, form refers to one’s own corporeal body.

2) *Feeling group*—Feeling, produced by contact between the sense-organs (eyes, ears, nose, etc.) and sense-objects, is a subjective state in which sensation is experienced as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

3) *Perception group*—Perception (*sanna*) is related to the apprehension of sense-data and mental objects. Perception is one of the universal mental factors (*cetasika*) that accompanies all states of consciousness. However, in Buddhism perception sometimes refers to memory. The *Buddhist Dictionary* states that perception, “is the awareness of an object’s distinctive marks (‘one perceives blue, yellow, etc.,’ S. XXII, 79). If, in repeated perception of an object, these marks are recognized, *sanna* functions as ‘memory’.”

4) *Mental activities group*—This group refers to all mental formations. It also refers to volition (the mental faculty of action).

5) *Consciousness group*—According to the *Buddhist Dictionary*, consciousness “is inseparably linked with the 3 other mental groups (feeling, perception and formations) and *furnishes the bare cognition of the object*, while the other 3 contribute more specific functions.” [Italics added.] Consciousness cannot arise on its own, but only appears simultaneously with feeling, perception and so forth. Consciousness is unsatisfactory, impermanent, and nonself.

The *Dictionary* further states, “Just like the other groups of existence, consciousness is a flux (*vinnana-sota*, 'stream of consciousness') and does not constitute an abiding mind-substance; nor is it a transmigrating entity or soul.”

Regarding the khandhas in general, S. XXII, 95 states: “Suppose that a man who is not blind were to behold the many bubbles on the Ganges as they are driving along; and he should watch them and carefully examine them. After carefully examining them, however, they will appear to him empty, unreal and insubstantial. In exactly the same way does the monk behold all the corporeal phenomena ... feelings ... perceptions ... mental formations ... states of consciousness, whether they be of the past, present or future ... far or near. And he watches them and examines them carefully; and after carefully examining them, they appear to him empty, unreal and insubstantial.”

Form: In regard to the five aggregates, form refers to the body. Generally speaking, however, form has a much broader meaning in Buddhism.

Form includes the four elements of solidity, liquidity, heat, and air; the five sense-organs; the five sense-impressions (color, sound, smell, flavor, tactile impressions); the characteristics of masculinity and femininity; the so-called mind base; the vital force; and nutritive essence.

Ideas or thoughts can also be regarded as a kind of form. In Buddhism, the mind is regarded as the sixth sense-organ. Thoughts and ideas are its object.

Material forms are under the influence of opposing physical conditions such as heat and cold, and are always undergoing change and decay.

Insight (*Vipassana*): The special, intuitive knowledge that directly sees impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, or nonselfness. This insight is immediate and experiential. It is not a thought or a concept. Insight is the means by which we can eradicate all clinging. It dispels ignorance and leads to the end of dukkha.

Mind: A conglomerate or stream of ever-changing mental events and processes, which lacks an abiding self. Mind is traditionally divided into pure consciousness (*citta*) and mental factors (*cetasika*). Consciousness receives or apprehends objects such as sights, sounds, and so on. Mental factors always accompany consciousness, arising simultaneously. Mental factors include such things as feeling (*vedana*), volition, anger, and compassion. The Abhidhamma lists 52 mental factors.

Object: Something that is perceived or known by an agent (the mind), as opposed to an agent that has the faculty of perceiving; a sense-datum; a percept; something that is perceived, such as a sight, smell, or feeling of pain; any phenomenon that comes within one's field of awareness and is apprehended or sensed by the mind. In vipassana practice, an object stands in contradistinction to the knowing agent, the mind. The mind knows x ; an object x is known. In the broadest sense an object can be anything, whether mental or material. It may be an externally-existing phenomenon such as color or sound, or an idea created by the mind itself.

Note that Achan Sobin also uses "object" to refer to the main phenomenon on which we place our attention during meditation, more usually called a meditation *subject*. For example, during walking meditation the object of our focus is the movement of the feet. The student should be careful to avoid confusion on this point.

Subject: The thinking, perceiving agent; the temporary mind or conglomerate of conditions that engages in mental operations, as distinguished from the object. The subject is not permanent, nor is it a self.

Recommended Reading

Buddhist Meditation, Edward Conze

Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice, P. Vajiranana

The Experience of Insight, Joseph Goldstein

The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, Nyanaponika Thera

Living Buddhist Masters, Jack Kornfield, Ed.

Manual of Abhidhamma, Narada Thera

Meditation in Action, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

The Path of Purification (Visuddhi Magga), Vols. I and II, Namoli Thera, Ed.

The Path of Serenity and Insight, Venerable Dr. H. Gunaratana

Practical Insight Meditation, Mahasi Sayadaw

The Progress of Insight, Mahasi Sayadaw

The Psychology of Nibbana, Rune Johansson

Seeking the Heart of Wisdom, Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield

Theravada Meditation, Winston L. King

Towards the Truth, Donald Swearer, Ed.

Tranquility & Insight, Amadeo Sole-Lens

The Way of Mindfulness: Commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta, Soma Thera